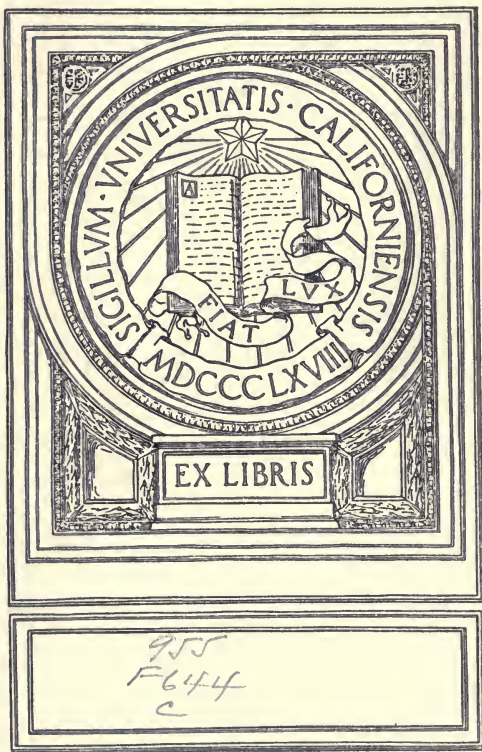


A Celibate's Wife  
*by Herbert Flowerdew*



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A Celibate's Wife

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# A Celibate's Wife

By

Herbert Flowerdew

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*"A man's conscience is a dead thing unless he is prepared to break at its command every law that the world holds sacred."*—THE UNKNOWN MAN.

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John Lane : The Bodley Head  
London and New York  
1899

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

TO THE  
ADMINISTRATIVE

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# A Celibate's Wife

## CHAPTER I

AN inventory, taken after his tragic death, of the contents of Canon Presyllett's study, included, among other things, a set of old oak library furniture, an early-English organ "of great interest to collectors," although it was not in playing order, several brass candlesticks, a beautifully carved crucifix and rosary (merely articles-de-vertu, of course, in the house of an Anglican clergyman), a brazier for burning incense, together with a quaintly carved old vase containing a supply of the same, and a Turkey carpet, sombre in colouring, but of luxurious thickness. The large stained-glass window which threw a subdued light on it all was not included in the inventory, although it had been erected by the Canon at his own expense. The window was a matter for the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to consider in summing up the dilapidations and repairs that the Rectory of Windlehurst had undergone during the Canon's residence there. The inventory of the room's contents was taken for valuation purposes, and a price, in pounds, shillings, and pence, was sacrilegiously set even upon the crucifix. The supply of incense in the vase was worth half-a-crown.

But pounds, shillings, and pence are poor standards when we try to sum up the real value of things, and the inventory bore no mention of the faint smell of incense which hung perpetually over the room, of the changing cathedral-lights which fell across the soundless carpet, of the hushed old-world air which would be lost like the spirit of a dead man

when the parts were separated. For that task some unit of emotion is needed to show the value of the study's contents; the aid which they gave to the Canon's devotion when, with locked door, he flung himself in an abandonment of prayer before the antique praying-stool which had belonged to a martyred bishop of the middle ages; the effect which it had in subduing, with its sensuous calm, the everyday thoughts of those who came across the threshold to seek the Canon's counsel or advice.

The involuntary awe which the room itself inspired was strong on the Squire of Windlehurst when he called upon the Canon with his friend Gabriel Lyne, and was ushered by the Rector's solemn housemaid into the study.

His voice was a little less bluff than usual, and he plunged into the business that had brought him with a nervous lack of periphrasis.

"Evening, Canon. I have brought my friend Lyne round to talk about the Sunday opening of the reading-room. You see, it is like this, Canon. At present we are evenly matched, as you know, for and against, on the committee, and I have the casting vote. So far I have given it to your side, but Lyne has been arguing with me, and he has made it look very much as if I ought to turn round. Oh! by the way, you have not actually met before, have you? Mr. Lyne—Canon Presyllett."

He paused as if he expected the two men to shake hands, but the Rector only inclined his head very slightly, and Gabriel Lyne used the hand he had moved, to push back the hair from his square forehead.

Only the good-natured Squire changed colour, and he spoke more rapidly to cover his annoyance.

"I thought that the most friendly and straightforward course would be to bring Lyne here to talk to you. I can't see anything wrong in his arguments myself, but I believe in hearing both sides."

The whiff of the incense in his nostrils, and the cathedral glow of the setting sun filtered through the painted window, like truth passed through a religious setting, accounted for the accent of apology. Involuntarily it had made him feel a bias on the side of the Canon, and the straightforward

honesty which outside had made him drag Gabriel Lyne to the Rectory took a colouring of impiety in his eyes in the study. He was not analytical enough to account for the change, or think of realising that all the *prima facie* evidence the Rector had on his side was one stained-glass window, one set of old oak furniture, including a mediæval organ out of repair, one brazier for burning incense, and so on according to the inventory.

Gabriel Lyne had already dissected the influence which the place had just as involuntarily exercised upon him, and had steeled himself against it as against the influence of a harlot's patchouli perfume. To him it was the mechanical effect of an unholy attempt to bias thought with sensuous emotion; but to the Squire—he glanced from the face of his friend, cold with the mental effort he was making against an appeal to his senses, to that of the thin-visaged ascetic haloed by the light till it looked to him that of a saint, and saw himself pitting not the honest opinion of one man against that of another, but the opinion of the world against that of God.

In personal appearance the representative of the world had, by a worldly valuation, more to recommend him than the exponent of God. They were both tall men, but the Canon had the narrow-chested gauntness of the ascetic, and his clerical dress failed to conceal a graceless want of proportion in his long-bodied form. The same want of proportion was visible in his face, with its preponderating chin. The coarseness of the lower part indeed, with its loose-lipped mouth, would have suggested the character of a sensualist, but for the evident signs of fasting and self-abnegation which thinned and refined the whole expression, and for the large devotional brown eyes above—the eyes of a genuine religious enthusiast. The sharp-pointed nose gave an added keenness to the face, which in a natural light was pale and sallow, but now, in the combined colouring of sunset and painted glass, glowed with a strange brightness to which the luminous emotional eyes added effect. Unconsciously no doubt, the Rector of Windlehurst had studied the effects of his window as the actor studies the effects of the limelight, and had taken up his position with one gaunt arm on the mantelshelf, to

catch the chief ray of light in the room. If his visitors had called a little later when the candles were lighted, he would have stood, with the unconsciousness of habit, at the other side of the room.

All the men were still standing, Gabriel Lyne with a taut erectness which showed his attitude of mind as clearly as it displayed the perfection of his physical proportions. In face and figure he showed neither the starved thinness of the ecclesiastic nor the comfortable fleshiness of the coarser-framed Squire. His body was that of a sensibly trained athlete, every limb rounded and supple, but owing its form to muscle alone. His handsome head and face put into readable hieroglyphics the chief facts of his character, the general balance of his features showing the balance of his emotions and mental powers, while a sharp curve in the eyebrow, a slight excess of ridged nose, his bright grey eye, and something about the strong mouth and chin, explained how his character had been saved from the general fate of forces-in-equilibrium. It was these slight variations from perfect symmetry which, without spoiling Gabriel Lyne's good looks, enabled one to understand how his name had become a byword in Windlehurst as that of the chief opponent of religion—as Windlehurst understood religion. But it was the inert sweetness of balanced forces rather than the initiative strength of predominating ones in his character which led to his presence in the ascetic's study. He wished to please his friend the Squire, but he had no hope of any practical result from the interview. Starting from such different bases as that of the Rector and his own, all argument between them was sure to be merely a play of words; and if the Squire was to be influenced at all on either side, it must be by mere dramatic display on his part or the churchman's. Even to gain an object so dear to him as the Sunday opening of the village reading-room, Gabriel was too honest to stoop to merely dramatic methods. The Canon might do so, not that he was consciously dishonest, but because his mind had never questioned the honesty of dramatic display. All that the juster—from a worldly standpoint—man of the two could hope to do was to detect the display and point out its dishonesty, and he did not look forward to the encounter.

The Canon appeared no more desirous for it.

"The subject appears to me to have been worn threadbare at the meetings of the reading-room committee, Mr. Gateacre," he said, addressing the Squire with a studied avoidance of Lyne's presence. His voice was a low deep one, and its intonation—that of a man who has studied talking as an art—made the Squire's more natural tone seem by contrast less in accord than ever with the incense-tinged room. The latter had regained its bluntness at the remembrance of the committee debates, in which the Canon had not always appeared to complete advantage.

"Oh! but Lyne is not on the committee," he said, and a smile flitted momentarily across the clergyman's thin loose lips, which disappeared as the Squire went on enthusiastically, "and Lyne does not argue like Hodges and Benson. He goes down to the root of the matter."

"But I cannot see that any advantage would arise from my discussing the question with a gentleman who is not on the committee," said the Rector, his persuasive smoothness of speech contrasting again with the Squire's outburst.

"You may please yourself, of course, Canon, but the fact of Lyne's not being on the committee does not prevent his talking to me. I only thought that you might like to show me where his weak point is, since I cannot see it for myself, before I take his advice and give the casting vote the other way, when the subject is reopened, as it is sure to be. After what Lyne has been saying, I shall reopen the question myself if nobody else does."

With a dramatic gesture the Rector spread out his long bony hands that had been tightly clasped.

"If you are prepared to take a step so fraught with real harm and danger to the villagers under your temporal care, Mr. Gateacre, I can only deplore that you have allowed an influence so mischievous to guide you."

The Squire was evidently cowed by the pastoral rebuke, but chivalry to his friend rather than any realisation of the fact that Canon Presyllett was simply "begging" the question overcame even the influence of the room, and he still answered warmly.

"But that is just the point I want deciding—whether Lyne's influence *is* mischievous, and if so, where its mischief lies."

"Any influence must be bad which urges you to introduce into our Christian country the deplorable Continental Sunday," said the Rector impressively, shifting his position slightly as he saw that the sun had passed beyond his face and caught the carved crucifix on the mantelshelf behind him. "I have often pointed out that the opening of reading-rooms and free libraries on Sunday is only the thin end of the wedge which would see us ultimately plunged into the most deplorable dissipations and excesses."

He still avoided even glancing in the direction of Gabriel, who stood silent and almost motionless, with just the twinkle of an amused smile in his ready grey eyes at the fight which was to be waged before Canon Presyllett cared to exchange opinions with him. It was the first time that he had met the clergyman at such close quarters, and he spent his time analysing the worn face in much the same way as he had analysed the effect produced by the furniture of the room.

The Squire, responsible for his presence, was chafing at the hostility shown him, and hastened to drag him into the argument.

"Ah! the Continental Sunday. What have you to say about that, Lyne?" he asked, turning to him.

"I think it preferable to the English one," said Gabriel, speaking for the first time, his voice more naturally musical than the churchman's, but lacking its studied cadence. "But I have no wish to drag the Canon into a discussion against his will, if you have, Squire." His grey eyes lighted up with an irresistible smile.

The Squire only looked angry.

"You had plenty to say to me why the reading-room should be opened without getting down to religion at all. Why don't you say it to Presyllett?"

"I shall be most happy to, if he wishes to hear it. But that is just the question you were trying to decide—whether he wishes it or not. A man has as much right to his wishes as his opinions, and when I unwillingly agreed to come with you here, I certainly did not agree to invade Canon Presyllett's house with my opinions, against his will."

It is stated to be part of English Court etiquette that any stranger dining with the Queen must address to a third person anything he has to say to her, to whom her Majesty in turn addresses any answer she has to make. Squire Gateacre had read of the fact somewhere, and as the remembrance of it flashed into his mind he pitied his sovereign and her guests, and the personage who played the part of third person most of all. His own present experience told him that the duty could not be a pleasant one. He looked appealingly towards the Canon.

"I am quite willing to talk over with Mr. Lyne the merely moral aspect of the question," said Presyllett. "Apart from the religious side of the question altogether, there seem to me the most weighty objections against the opening of the reading-room on the day of rest. Surely on a basis of common fairness, Mr. Lyne, if you would encourage the villagers to give up the day to purely secular pursuits, you cannot think it right to compel the custodian of the reading-room to work seven days a week, and ride rough-shod over his religious scruples."

It was the first time that he had addressed the rationalist directly, and Gabriel's manner changed instantly from that of a mere onlooker. His expressive face filled with animation.

"It seems to me that it would be wiser to find a substitute for Jenkinson once a week," he said, turning to his opponent, "rather than that the whole village should lose the chance of reading while he takes a rest. There are plenty of reliable men in the place who would be only too glad of the position."

"It would increase the cost of the reading-room," said the Rector, and Gabriel smiled.

"By half-a-crown a week. If the place is worth its cost during six days when the men have very little time to use it, then it must be worth its cost on the seventh when they have the whole day to read. We are putting the religious aspect on one side, by your permission. And you cannot prove, I think, on any but religious grounds, that the only means of giving the custodian a day off is to close the reading-room altogether on the very day when the villagers have most opportunity of using it."

"That is how Lyne put it to me," interposed the Squire eagerly. "What have you to say to it, Canon?"

A shade of relief passed over the clergyman's face at finding that he had Gateacre to answer instead of Lyne. He drew himself up with a touch of his impressive pulpit manner.

"I am surprised that you, a churchman and a communicant, should look for any but the religious objection to desecrating the Sunday in this manner, Mr. Gateacre."

The Squire fidgeted uneasily under his Rector's reproofing glance, but the presence of his rationalist friend sustained his courage.

"I am not saying that I would use the reading-room myself on Sunday, Canon. That is not the question. It is whether I ought to prevent other people, who have not my religious objections, from using it. Every man has a right to his religious or irreligious opinions. We do not think of compelling a man to go to church or say his prayers against his will nowadays; and compelling him not to read a newspaper on Sunday seems on all-fours with doing so. You need not talk about my own religious convictions, Canon. I want to know what right I have to force them on other people."

"The welfare of the village is in a way entrusted to your care, Mr. Gateacre. You ought to make it a matter of prayer that you should fulfil wisely, and according to God's will, the important trust that He has placed in your hands. You have not attended any of the mission services which I have been holding this week, I believe—" He waved his bony hands, as the Squire was about to make an excuse. "I have no doubt that your duties have been too pressing. I was only going to say that I hope you will be able to attend this evening. My address will be about our duties to others. If you could meet me in the vestry afterwards, I should be glad to join with you in prayer to God that you may be rightly guided in this important matter of the Sunday opening of the reading-room."

Gabriel Lyne's lip curved a little scornfully. He took the suggestion as a proposal that the poor Squire should accept the Canon's own views without argument, and attempt by



the aid of an emotional exercise to quell the scruples of fairness and justice which made him at present oppose them. Mr. Gateacre stood undecided, feeling the same thing, but distrusting his feeling as something irreligious. The clergyman pursued his advantage.

"The service will commence in an hour's time," he said, glancing at his watch. "It would save you a walk, if you would care to share my frugal dinner. I should be glad if your friend could stay too, although I am afraid that he would not care to attend the service."

He glanced towards the rationalist with a polite geniality, but his face showed little regret when Gabriel pleaded that his work would not allow him to accept the invitation.

"The Infidel," as they called him in Windlehurst, was conscious that the Rector had adroitly taken a rather unfair advantage of him in the struggle between them for the Squire's decision, but he had too perfect a faith in the comparative truth of his opinions to think of joining in a game of finesse in order to gain a triumph for them.

The Squire looked rather shamefaced as he shook hands with him after the Canon, when the young man took his leave; but there was neither reproach nor regret in Gabriel's friendly face.

"To-night Presyllett will have a good fling at Gateacre's emotional side," he said to himself. "To-morrow I must have my turn with his reason."

Unconsciously he was preparing, as he left the house, the arguments which he would use to show the Squire the unfairness of Canon Presyllett's method of conviction, based as it was upon the *a priori* acceptance of the idea that the Canon was right and another man wrong. He was getting ready the cold douche of common-sense with which he hoped to clear his friend's mind after the debauch of prayer which lay before him, and he walked down the broad gravel drive which led from the Rectory to the road scarcely conscious of the beauty of the old-fashioned garden with its well-kept lawns, and gravel paths, its ancient yews, and absence of flowers, which gave it an air of asceticism. Its neatness and its size, as he entered the place half-an-hour before with the

Squire, had made him calculate that the Canon must employ at least two gardeners.

"The garden of an ascetic, you see," the Squire had said, with a wave of his hand towards the yews and the perfectly trimmed box hedges; and Gabriel had replied with a smile, which Gateacre did not altogether understand—

"Yes; the ascetic must spend a good deal of money to keep it so."

Now his thoughts no longer concerned themselves with his surroundings, although in a less thoughtful mood he would have stopped to admire the red gleam of the setting sun that shot through the gaunt arms of the old trees and threw their long shadows peacefully across the lawn.

He was only roused from his thoughts by the clicking of the gate, and glancing up, saw approaching him a figure strangely in keeping with the convent-like garden. It was that of a girl in a plain grey cloak, and a Quaker-like little bonnet of the same colour. It was her attitude rather than her dress, however, which suggested the nun to his mind; for the plainness of the latter was rendered unnoticeable by the grace of her tall slender figure and the refined beauty of her face, with its frame of neatly parted red-gold hair, which the sun turned into a halo under the prim bonnet. She walked with a slow meditative step which fell noiselessly on the gravel, her long slender hands clasped before her, and her eyes demurely on the ground.

Lyne, who loved everything that was beautiful, hoped that she would raise them as she passed him, but the hope was a vain one. Their long lashes seemed to touch her rounded cheek as she walked slowly by, and she took no more notice of him than a real nun would have done in the presence of her lady superior.

The young man turned to glance after her with interest and pity in his mind—interest because of the undoubted beauty which her devout dress and air had failed to conceal, pity because of her devoutness.

"Poor girl," he said to himself, with a sigh that was half sympathy and half bitterness, and then he hurried after her with a smile in his eyes.

"Pardon me, you have dropped your handkerchief."

She was obliged to raise her eyes to his as she took it from him and thanked him in a voice as beautiful as her face, but set in an intonation as prim as her bonnet. Her eyes were of a deep grey that was almost blue, but Gabriel did not see their colour as his own met them for one moment. He was one of those men who receive impressions and examine the details which have produced them carefully afterwards; and on this occasion he had time only for the impression. It was that the "nun," as he had called her to himself, was a sweet girl, and that he would like to know her; and he turned back to the gate feeling more pitiful than ever to think that some false priest-made view of the Creator had compelled her to hide the beautiful red-gold hair He had given her under an ugly bonnet, and trim the music of her voice into a hackneyed primness.

The pity of it kept her in his thoughts all the way home, to the complete exclusion of the Squire and the reading-room; and he found himself wondering again and again who the girl could be, and what her business was at the Rectory.

"Can she be sister to that emotional egotist, the worthy Canon?" he said to himself. "I suppose such men have sisters, although it is hard to imagine. He is too holy to have a wife, but all the holiness in the world cannot save him from having a mother, much as he may desire to escape the pollution of such a fact, and the mother may have added to her sins by having other children. Yes, I suppose she is his sister, and under his thumb at present, but her eyes looked honest enough to make one hope that she may escape some day. I hope she will, and wear nice clothes, and be a woman instead of a nun."

## CHAPTER II

"THERE is another thing that I wanted to talk to you about, Canon," said the bluff Squire when he was left alone with Presyllett.

He was feeling in a vague way that he had scarcely acted with fairness towards his young friend in delivering himself over to the clergyman's undiluted arguments, and changed the subject as a compromise with his conscience

"There is another thing I wanted to talk about, Canon. As you have been saying, the village is in a way under my care, and I am sure that I try and do my best to look after it. I listen to all the complaints I hear, and try to satisfy everybody."

"I am sure that you do, and am always glad to think that Windlehurst has at its head a man so conscious of his responsibilities," said the Rector, with a touch of that unconscious insolence which we take as a natural thing from a man who has passed certain examinations and had a bishop's hands laid upon him. "What is the latest complaint in the village?"

"It is a complaint against you, Canon."

The clergyman's placid smile of pastoral interest died away suddenly.

"Against myself?"

"Yes. It is a complaint that I have heard on and off ever since you came here; but since these mission services of yours began, I have heard nothing else, from the ladies at any rate in the parish. I thought that the fairest thing would be to mention it to you. If it is anybody's duty, I suppose it is mine, and although the matter is one of conscience with you, I believe, still it seems to me that you ought to know both sides of the question."

A look of bewilderment on the Canon's face struggled with a meek smile of Christian humility.

"If my parishioners have any grievance against me, it is certainly right that I should know it," he said with a mixture of resignation and curiosity. "What is it?"

The suggestion that it was connected with a matter of conscience on his part had come as a relief to him. In the first shock he had almost feared that it might be indictment against his etiquette, which every man feels to be worse than an indictment against his religious views. Possibly it was the old revolt against certain practices of his which the parish chose to consider popish. Not that the Canon could have graduated before a more critical board of examiners as even a consistent High Churchman. The Ritualistic movement had touched him, it is true, in his University days, but only on his emotional side, and the tinge of ceremonial with which he alarmed his rustic congregation, like the incense which he burned in his study, was due rather to the theatrical trend of his mind than to any weakening of the purely Evangelical principles with which he had been brought up, and which still directed his attitude of thought. Captain Benson, a High Churchman who was rendered indignant by the Rector's strict Sabbatarianism, had once spoken of him to the Squire as a John Knox playing at being a priest. His fasting and his celibacy, too, owed less to the example of the Romish Church than to principles evolved logically from his Evangelical creed, and shaped by his individual cast of mind, with some assistance from the Early Fathers, who in his University days had managed to gain audience with his conscience.

"If my conscience will permit me," he went on, allowing the gleam from the stained window to illuminate his thin face, "I shall be most ready to remove the grievance, whatever it is."

"That is just it," said the Squire, "whether your conscience will allow you. It is that which makes me rather diffident about talking the matter over with you. You see, Canon, what all the parishioners are saying is, that you ought to be a married man."

"Indeed!" said the Canon, flushing slightly; and the Squire ran on hastily—

“You see, it is like this, Presyllett. You know what women are like in a parish where there is an unmarried clergyman, each one suspecting the other of setting her cap at him. It is not as if you were a Romanist and really bound to celibacy.”

“I am bound by my own private vows,” interrupted the clergyman.

“Just so; but when so many clergymen marry, it can only be a matter of opinion with you to prefer celibacy, and the best of us change our opinions. I do not think myself that you will change yours, but the ladies of the parish think you may, and it makes their position rather uncomfortable. Now, in your mission services last week you invited anybody who wished, to speak to you privately either in the vestry after the service or at the Rectory. I understand that there have been a good many ladies touched by your addresses who would like to avail themselves of this invitation, but who dare not, on account of public opinion. Putting aside the propriety of a lady visiting an unmarried man at his house—which it is foolish to question, of course, in the case of a clergyman—the ladies feel that they cannot come here without a malicious rumour going round the village that they are trying to lure you into matrimony. The malicious backbiting which is at the root of the matter is wrong, of course, but that does not prevent it existing and affecting people. It is so strong, the Misses Gaydon inform me—very worthy maiden ladies, as you know, Canon—that they dare not engage in parish work of any description on account of it.”

“But surely nobody would suspect Miss Prudence or Miss Iphigenia of wishing to marry me,” said the Canon, with a faint smile, as he thought of the two prim old maids whose opinion the Squire had introduced.

The temporal head of the village flung out his fat hands.

“Everybody is suspected. I do not know what it is about a clergyman that makes every woman either anxious to marry him herself, or afraid of every other woman in the place wanting to. Not that it is to be wondered at in your case, Presyllett. It makes the fact that you are a bachelor a real hindrance to your spiritual work in the parish.”

“And you think that therefore I ought to marry?” asked the Canon, with a seriousness in his voice which made it sound as though he were really anxious for the Squire’s opinion.

The seriousness was not assumed. Many many times the idea of marriage had come to him as a temptation, which his loose-lipped mouth and coarse chin explained, and he unconsciously welcomed its recurrence in the light of a duty.

With the ordinary man, the angel and the beast in him contend over the question of one mate or many. With Canon Presyllett, the angel being indued with ascetic notions, handed over the question of one mate to the beast, and found his work all the harder in consequence. That the beast with such added powers, love and the domestic virtues on his side, could be controlled at all, argued well for the strength of Canon Presyllett’s character. But with the strongest characters the beast is for ever trying to disguise himself in the angel’s feathers, and he was busy now as the Squire pleaded against the Rector’s celibacy in the name of the parish’s welfare.

The Canon detected the imposture, and shook his head with a sigh.

“I have always been conscious of the disadvantages you suggest which arise from my unmarried state,” he said thoughtfully, “although they have never been stated to me so clearly; but I cannot help feeling that for me marriage would be a sin. I do not judge those ministers of God who marry; it is a matter for their own consciences; but with my views of a priest’s duty, the taking of a wife would be wrong. It has always seemed to me that a priest of God should show his flock the highest ideal of purity, and make no compromise with the world and the flesh.”

“Many very holy men marry,” said the Squire, thinking at the moment of the bishop of the diocese, who had seven daughters.

“But Christ did not,” said the Canon; and the Squire subsided, and began to apologise for the temerity which had made him suggest marriage to such a holy man.

The Canon was very kind about it, complimenting him on the unselfish interest in those around him which had prompted the suggestion, and admitting the gravity of the disadvantages which arose from his own views.

"I am very anxious," he went on, "to do my whole duty by my flock, and I have sought in prayer for some means of meeting the real bar to my work among the ladies of the parish which is raised by my celibacy. I still hope that God will raise up some way for me."

There was a tap at the door as he spoke, and the solemn housemaid announced that Miss Gaydon wished for an interview with the Canon.

"Is it Miss Prudence or Miss Iphigenia?" asked the Canon, who was surprised after what the Squire had been saying to receive a visit from either of the old maids.

"Neither, sir—a young lady."

"Oh! their niece," said the Canon half to himself, and his face became a little more animated as he turned to the Squire.

"Perhaps you would not mind waiting for me in the drawing-room, Gateacre, until dinner. One of my lady parishioners is anxious for a talk with me."

He laid a slight stress on the "lady," for the fact offered some contradiction to what the Squire had been saying.

"I am afraid she does not know what the good ladies of Windlehurst are like," said the Squire. "This niece of the Gaydons has only been staying with them a month or two, hasn't she?"

The Canon nodded, and stepped slowly across the hall to the little anteroom at the other side, where the Nun, as Gabriel Lyne had called her, had been left by the solemn housemaid. As the Squire turned into the austere and expensively furnished drawing-room he caught a glance of Canon Presyllett's gaunt figure and the girl's graceful one as they entered the old-world study together, and he paused to listen whether the key turned in the lock, as it usually did when the Rector was about to talk and pray with a seeker after holiness.

The worthy Squire, who was always puzzled, found himself unconsciously comparing the claims of God and Mrs. Grundy.

But no thought of worldly propriety was in the mind of Angela Gaydon as she entered the incense-tinged room. For her the gaunt ascetic was not a man, but something far higher, the earthly representative of the Master whom she loved and worshipped with all the passion of a young



emotional nature, an embodiment of the ideal she had set herself of unworldliness and self-sacrifice. She had trembled as he took her hand, awed and honoured as if she were having audience with an angel. She had never spoken to him before, but in the church she had seen him standing high above the entranced congregation, his face illuminated by the pulpit-lights, and his eyes filled with the spiritual exaltation which always came to him as he preached; and she felt now as if she had been brought nearer God by the touch of his hand. When he spoke, it seemed to her a mark almost of condescension that he should speak like a friend.

"I have seen you at church with your aunts, I believe," he said. "I am very pleased that you have accepted the invitation I gave there and come to see me. There are so many things that one cannot say in a public discourse, special words of help for one soul that another may not need or may not understand. Each individual soul has its own difficulties and hopes, and when I speak to one, I do not speak to another always. When the preacher addresses those who still stand at the parting of the ways, still asking themselves whether they shall give up their wills to Christ, his words are almost lost for those who have long ago made the decision, and are only asking how best they can serve Him."

He had been lighting the candles—for the sunset glow had died away, and he talked as he did so—to put her at her ease. Now he seated himself in a carved chair opposite the easy one he had given her, and waited for her to answer.

Her face had flushed a little, and her eyes brightened with the devotional excitement of speaking to such a man in such a room. It was the feeling of a girl at her first communion. But she showed no ordinary shyness or nervousness. Only her breath came quicker than usual, and made her pause between her words, as she answered him—

"All your addresses have been very helpful to me, and I have been very thankful for them. It was hearing you in the pulpit which made me think I might ask your advice on a subject which has been in my mind for many months now."

"I shall be most happy to help you if I can."

She thanked him with an inclination of her head.

"Perhaps you will tell me that my thoughts and wishes are wrong," she went on, rather anxiously, "and are due to my training; but to me they seem the only thing that can be right."

"Your training?" he interrupted questioningly.

"I was educated at a convent-school on the Continent, which I left two years ago, when I was seventeen."

"Your parents belonged to the Church of Rome, then?"

"Oh no! It is perhaps the thought of them which has prevented me changing my faith. The school at Thildonck was chosen for me only because of its educational advantages. There are many Protestant English girls there, and no attempt is made to proselytise them. My greatest friend there, however, happened to be French and a Roman Catholic. I went to stay with her when we left school together. I am an orphan, and my aunts at Windlehurst approved of an arrangement that was pleasant to us both. I hope you do not mind listening to these details," she broke off; "it helps me to explain a desire I have which may possibly shock you. I lived with my friend at her home in Auvergne until a few weeks ago, when she took the veil, and I came to Windlehurst to live with my aunts."

He nodded as she paused, and there was silence for a few moments, the girl twisting her clasped hands together nervously.

"If I were a Roman Catholic, I should be tempted to take the veil also, Canon Presyllett," she said abruptly, making him turn his face away as she looked up; for his eyes had been fixed on her face, tender and glowing with feeling.

"I can quite understand and sympathise with your desire," he said in his well-modulated voice. "But you have no temptation to enter the Roman Church, I hope, Miss Gaydon?"

"No; the memory of my mother alone would prevent that, I think. But the parting from my friend has made me feel that the English Church has something wanting. Cecile can enter the sacred seclusion of the convent. I am forced out into the thoughtless world."

"But in the thoughtless world you can find work to do for God," he said gently. "You can devote your life to Him without taking any vow."

"Yes, but it is so hard," she said piteously. "I want to

remain in the world, there are so many poor and suffering and ignorant to help. There seems to me a certain selfishness in leaving them for the convent. I was not complaining that I have to work in the world, at least I did not mean to. It is only that I have no way of being in the world and showing people that I am not of it. The English Church offers me no badge or vow which those around me would recognise as really binding me. I am afraid that it will be hard for you to understand me. I do not want to parade the fact that I have given myself wholly to Jesus. But it would be so much more easy for me to keep my thoughts always on Him if I were not distracted by the persistence with which my friends and relatives take it for granted that I have the same motives and desires as themselves."

"For instance?" he said gently; and she clasped and unclasped her slender fingers with a painful effort at expression.

"In matters of dress. My aunts know what life I have chosen, but they are always saying, 'You must not dress so quietly; you make yourself a guy,' as though I were not striving to trample earthly vanity under foot. Then above everything, the idea they have that I shall marry is so distracting to my deepest thoughts. It is impossible for them to imagine a woman having any aim but marriage. I shall never marry, and I have said so plainly, but they will not understand. Cecile takes a vow, and nobody troubles her. If there were only a vow I could take which would persuade the world that I never meant to marry. That alone would solve all my difficulty, I think; for with the world around me, everything seems to turn on marriage. 'If you look such a guy, nobody will marry you,' they say; and cannot understand that the idea of adorning myself for such a purpose is degrading and horrible to me. They speak of marriage almost as if it were a duty, as if I am committing a crime in abandoning all thought of it. The attitude of my aunts and their friends is a constant distraction to me. Sometimes I wonder even whether I shall not come insensibly to think like them, to accept their standards, through having them thrust always before me; and the thought is terrible."

If she had spoken like this to Gabriel Lyne, he would have

told Miss Gaydon that she was a prig, and that the ideas of those around her were most probably truer and better than her own, as she was likely to find out for herself when she was a few years older; but Canon Presyllett was very sympathetic.

"I understand your wish entirely," he said, leaning back in his carved chair and clasping his gaunt hands before him, "but I am afraid that I can offer you nothing but my sympathy. I am met myself by exactly the same difficulty, and I have looked in vain for any earthly means of meeting it. I believe firmly in the necessity for the clergy to be celibate, but because the Church does not bind me to celibacy, I am treated on all sides as a man who may marry at any time; and the fact is a serious hindrance to me in my parish work."

"I have heard Aunt Iphigenia speak of it," she said. "I could not tell her to-day that I was coming here, because of the light in which she insists upon looking at both of us."

"I am glad that you understand my difficulty. It is the same as your own, is it not?"

She answered with a smile in her beautiful eyes. In a way, this saint-like man had lifted her to his own level. He could not help her in her particular trouble, but he had given her almost greater happiness in telling her that he shared it. What wonderful condescension it seemed on his part when he took her hand and suggested that they should help each other.

"I am afraid that I can give little help," she said, flushed with the honour he paid her, but conscious of the great difference between this man's spiritual attainments and her own. "I came to you thinking that you might know of some sisterhood in the English Church which I might join."

"I am afraid that there is none whose vows would be taken by your friends as absolutely binding like those of the Romish Church."

More or less deliberately he dismissed summarily from his mind the idea of her entering one of the Protestant sisterhoods, with the existence of which she was probably unacquainted, on account of a subtle interest he was beginning to feel in his fair questioner. To a man as isolated as the ascetic Canon, the smallest gleam of human sympathy is of great value; and the arrival of this unexpected woman

just at the moment when his old struggle for celibacy had been revived by the Squire's words, was very welcome to him. Her attitude was different from his own in that marriage apparently offered for her no physical temptation, but her difficulty enabled her to sympathise with one side of his in a manner that would be impossible to anybody else in the parish, if not in the diocese, and he looked forward to her help in considering the question, as a relief from a perfectly lonely struggle. If he had realised how much of his interest in Miss Gaydon was due to the fact that she was a beautiful girl, he would have struggled against it; but this time the beast had donned the feathers successfully, and he put away the idea of her joining a sisterhood which would remove her from Windlehurst and from his influence, with no suspicion that the angel had remained silent on the subject.

"We can help each other with our sympathy and our prayers," he said. "Let us join in prayer now for guidance."

He knelt down by the martyred bishop's stool, and prayed with his usual eloquence and fervour that God would show them a way out of the difficulties which beset them. But the prayer was a short one. The thoughts of the best of men come and go without reverence at the bidding of the slightest association of ideas. As he mentioned his difficulty, the thought of the Squire waiting for his dinner had flashed into his mind in the midst of his prayer; already he had left himself less than half-an-hour for the meal, and when he had risen from his knees, he bid the awed and subdued girl "Good-bye" rather hastily.

"You must come and see me to-morrow if possible, Miss Gaydon," he said genially, "and in the meantime I will give my best thought to the difficulty you experience in your following of our Lord. Perhaps I shall be able to think of some practical step which will be of assistance to you."

She gazed up at him with the eyes of a devout worshipper.

"You are very very kind," she said. "I shall certainly come."

### CHAPTER III

ANGELA GAYDON walked homeward in a state of spiritual exaltation, meeting on her way many of the villagers coming to church for the mission service, which would begin so soon now. The summoning bells came sweetly through the evening air, chiming in unison with her thoughts. The sun had gone, and, like an army of lost spirits which had waited for the night, an opal haze came creeping up mysteriously from the fields by the river on her left. There was a crispness in the early October air which made her blood flow more quickly, and added to the firm elasticity of her step. She felt fit for any noble enterprise, any feat of self-sacrificing heroism. She longed for some great duty to present itself for her performance.

It is always trying to an exalted nature like this when an insignificant question of conscience suggests itself, and Angela slackened her speed, and lost the pictures of angels and saints which she had conjured out of the evening mist, as the gables of Lilac Lodge, the Gaydons' home, showed themselves over the trees, and reminded her that her maiden aunts, with their unholy worship of the proprieties, would want to know where she had been.

After long debating with herself she had paid her visit to the Rectory in a moment of impulse, and remembered now for the first time that it would probably have made her late for dinner. Her aunts would be very cross, especially as they wanted to go to church; and Angela shrank a little from the ordeal of meeting them. Not that she was afraid of her aunts. Her natural fearlessness of disposition had been increased by the knowledge that her own life and motives were so different, so much higher than theirs. Angela Gaydon made a point of fearing nobody but God.

But it is very distressing for an enthusiast, ready to lay down her life for others, ready for any heroism, to have to sit down and listen to worldly complaints and reproaches over such a mundane subject as an over-done chop. The good ladies might even insist on knowing the reason of her lateness, the particular errand on which her search for holiness had taken her, and subject her most devout impulses to the standard of a worldly idea of propriety. She knew quite well that they would declare themselves horrified if she told them that she had been to the Rectory *alone*, but that fact by itself would not have debarred her for a moment from stating the fact bluntly.

There was a certain pleasure of martyrdom in suffering for the higher ideals of conduct which she held, and since her entrance into the quiet prim household she had shocked her aunts daily with merciless heroism.

The question of conscience was whether she should tell them that she was to visit the Rector again on the morrow. She hated concealing anything, especially to-night, when she was feeling, after her happy experience at the Rectory, specially braced for martyrdom. But there was the chance that if she mentioned the appointment, her visit might be forbidden, or one of her aunts might insist on being present at the interview. And if she said nothing about it, then it might look as if she were ashamed of what she was doing, or afraid of the truth. It is indeed trying when an insignificant point of duty like this suggests itself to an enthusiastic soul thirsting for great duties and great sacrifices.

Lilac Lodge was a plain, square house, with the doorway in the middle and a bow-window on each side of it. The Misses Gaydon would never have chosen a house which had not both sides exactly alike. It would have offended their idea of neatness, an idea which evidenced itself in the garden, with its straight path to the door dividing the lawn into even halves, every flower-bed and shrub on one side being matched by a similar flower-bed and shrub on the other. In the house itself everything went in pairs. There was not an ornament on any mantelshelf in the place which was not matched by another at a mathematically exact

distance from the other end. One would be Miss Prudence's, the other Miss Iphigenia's, and in case of breakage there was grief on one side and self-congratulation on the other. The sisters themselves formed almost as perfect a pair as the flower-beds and the ornaments. Born on the same day, their constant opposition to each other, which had lasted nearly forty years, had commenced with a struggle for priority of birth, and Miss Prudence had come off victor by twenty minutes. Iphigenia had been compensated by Providence with a couple of inches more height than her sister, a fact against which Miss Prudence never ceased to revolt, both on the score of fairness and neatness. Perhaps it was this revolt which had made her face a little sharper and more ill-tempered than that of her sister. Perhaps the difference lay in their histories. Iphigenia had loved and been loved fifteen years before, but her lover had been killed in an accident the day after he had declared himself. Short as the old maid's love experience had been, it had left in her face a touch of tenderness and sweetness which her sister's did not know. Not but that Prudence claimed to have had a suitor too, at a later time, but she was even more unfortunate than her sister. Her suitor had died a day *before* his declaration. At least so Prudence always affirmed, and Iphigenia never had the heart to ask her why he should have declared himself then, any more than during the ten years, previous to his death, that he had known the sisters and paid them equal attention. She had her memory; it was fair that Prudence should lay full claim to the other. They had plenty of other things to squabble and contend about, including everything in the house that could not be paired, and in which they had a joint interest.

Their niece was one, the hall-stand was another.

The hall-stand was an heirloom, or of course it would not have been there, for it had only a single row of hat-pegs running down the centre. They had brought it with them when they started housekeeping together on the death of their mother, and had struggled over it ever since. It was a custom with them to hang their hats and cloaks there when they came in from a walk, carrying them upstairs, to be put



away with mathematical neatness afterwards when they were rested; and it was one of the objects of life with each of them to secure as often as possible the highest peg. There is nothing more pathetic than to see the straits to which a woman who need not work and must not bear children is often put in order to infuse a little zest into existence.

It was a proof of the deep interest which the old maids took in the struggle for the hat-peg, that it was not forgotten when Angela arrived, and presented another field for the display of constant finesse and adroitness. If two nieces had come to the prim house together, it is possible that the sisters would have agreed on an amicable division; Prudence would have taken one under her wing, and Iphigenia the other, to watch over, care for, and adjust to the pattern of the house. But as Angela had no pair,—and with her mingled piety and beauty, which so seldom go together, it would have been difficult to find one,—the old maids had begun by agreeing that they could not possibly receive her, and, now that her advent had become unavoidable, were vying with one another in gaining her love and correcting her faults. Luckily for the girl, the primary object with each was to gain her partisanship; and to the rivalry for her affection the beautiful girl owed much of her happiness in the house, and all her liberty. Miss Prudence and Miss Iphigenia joined hands in deploring the “strangeness” which made her for ever with the poor and sick of the village, but each one knew that if she tried to restrain her actions it would only give an opportunity to the other to take her part and earn a larger share of the girl’s good-will. The consequence was, that in the most prim and orderly household in Windlehurst the wayward and perfectly unconventional girl found herself comparatively unfettered, and free to foster that love of her own way which was so closely connected with her love of Jesus.

As she walked up the straight gravel path that led to the house, Angela had decided to tell the whole truth, but to insist against all opposition on going alone to the Rectory next day. She hated the appearance of anything underhanded. It was easier for her to be defiant.

She braced herself up for the meeting with two rather cross ladies, and was pleasantly surprised to find that they had for once dined without her, and that her Aunt Prudence had already started for the church, missing her no doubt by taking a short cut through the fields.

Miss Iphigenia was quite apologetic about it. In spite of the two inches advantage over her sister, she was a very little woman, with hair that was beginning to grow grey, round bright brown eyes like a bird's, and a sharp little nose like a beak. There was something bird-like, too, in the movement of her head when she spoke, jerking it round quickly to face the person she spoke to, and then posing it on one side to listen for the answer. Prudence had exactly the same characteristics, but her beak was sharper, and there was more grey in her hair. Squire Gateacre always spoke of them to his wife as the two Tomtits.

"Prudence insisted on having dinner," twittered Miss Iphigenia. "You see, dear, it is a cold dinner to-day. It is Susannah's evening out, you know, and we never have anything hot, and Prue was so anxious not to be late to church. I hope you will not mind. I wanted to wait and take mine with you, but Prue is so obstinate, and was actually going without anything to eat at all if I had not given in. Of course she would have fainted before the service was over, and then she would have put it all down to me."

She was helping the girl off with her cloak as she spoke, standing on tiptoe to do so, and seemed to feel no curiosity about her lateness.

Over the meal she treated her confidentially to more complaints of her sister. Prudence had asserted her right to go to church instead of her, and it was right that she should gain some compensation by getting Angela to side with her in thinking Prudence unjust. The girl listened with a devout serenity and want of interest which would have discouraged anybody less fond of talking, or less injured than Miss Iphigenia felt herself to be.

It seemed that once a fortnight Susannah, the one maid, had an evening's holiday, and that a law of the household, which was the same thing as a law of the Medes and Persians,

forbade the sisters to leave the house unprotected. Twenty years before, a house in Windlehurst, temporarily left by its occupants, had been ransacked by a gang of London thieves. The Misses Gaydon took the duty of remaining on guard in turn. Every duty and every honour was taken in turn in the Gaydon household. Miss Iphigenia's complaint, spread over the whole of Angela's dinner, was that although strictly it was her sister's turn to leave the house, still Prudence had enjoyed the liberty on the last occasion when it was of any concern to either whether they went out or not, and that she had therefore a moral right to enjoy the luxury of hearing the Rector of Windlehurst's impassioned denunciations and appeals. The special services with which the Canon was attempting to stir up the religious feeling of the parish had attracted the whole village, and every evening so far had seen the two old maids and their niece at church. In a quiet and monotonous existence which knew nothing more exciting than the fight for the hall-stand and their niece's favour, the emotional services had come as an event in the village which atoned for the lack of a theatre or a concert-room. Miss Iphigenia was missing something, therefore, and she grumbled energetically, undeterred by the scant attention of her niece, whose mind was filled with higher thoughts, which made this wretched petty squabbling for precedence jar upon her, as a tiresome and worldly distraction.

It was not till the opportunity of sacrifice suggested itself that she really gave her mind to what the little woman was saying. She had been eating her cold meal hastily with the idea of reaching church herself in time for the sermon, and paused suddenly.

"Cannot I mind the house, Aunt Iphigenia?" she asked with the calm serenity which always puzzled and half-frightened the two excitable little Tomtits.

"Oh no, dear. You are so fond of the services, and you are so young to be left in the house alone, if anything should happen. Not that anything is likely to happen."

The question of leaving Angela in charge of the house had been argued out between the sisters for some hours, and they had agreed that she could not be asked to forego

the service. Unconsciously to themselves, they agreed on the point the more readily through a feeling that the question at issue was not how they should both go to church, but which one should triumph in her determination to go alone.

Now that Prudence had conquered, there would be some triumph for Miss Iphigenia if she could go after all, and, when her sister returned with an enthusiastic account of the sermon, surprise her by announcing that she also had heard it.

"I really cannot think of leaving you here alone," she said quite forcibly as the temptation occurred to her, and she made a laudable struggle before giving in. The love of martyrdom is inherent in the feminine breast, and there are many women who can never please themselves without assuring both themselves and those around them that they do so under protest.

Angela was keenly conscious of the subterfuge, and she listened with a little disdain, and insisted on the self-pleasing with as few words as possible. She was making a real sacrifice, for she had looked forward to hearing the saint in the pulpit. How could she help feeling a little superior to the woman who was only pretending?

Aunt Iphigenia chirruped protestingly all the way into her hat and cloak and all way down the gravel path to the darkening road, and Angela was glad to be left alone to think again of the happy experience that had been hers in the afternoon. She could afford to lose the words that Canon Presyllett would address to the whole congregation, when she had been honoured by hearing words from him addressed to herself alone.

With a happy thought she went up to her room to pray for him, as he had asked her, and remained there for a long while on her knees in the dark. She felt that she was very near to God to-night, and when a thought of the world obtruded itself she put it away quickly. Once,—it was when her hand touched her handkerchief,—there rose before her memory the face of a handsome, masterly-looking man, with a pleasant smile in his eyes, and a musical voice. His air of frank courtesy, as he restored the lost handker-

chief to her in the Rectory garden, had been pleasing to her, but it was a pleasure that was of the world, and she put away the memory of it quickly, as she lighted her lamp in order to pore over the pages of Thomas à Kempis.

If it had occurred to her that her aunts would be pleased, when they got in, to find the dinner cleared away and supper set, in the absence of Susannah, she would have tried to satisfy them, for Angela never consciously allowed herself to shirk a duty; but there was no connecting link between the pages she was poring over and the dirty dishes below to make her think of them. It is the weakness of all special incentives to the performance of duty that they absorb the energy which should be spent in detecting what our particular duties are. Angela was much too near God to-night for her to think of pleasing anybody but Him, and His wishes with regard to such mundane matters as meals did not occur to her, as they would have done if she had centred her mind on Miss Iphigenia.

That little lady, released from duty, had hastened in the direction of the church, avoiding the path through the fields, with that regard for her personal safety which in an unmarried woman generally increases as the charms to which her danger is due decay. The keenness of the air which affects one so strongly when it first advances on the heels of summer with a nearness that enables one to feel its contrast to the languor that is past, braced her as it had done Angela, but in a different manner. It made her feel a keener zest for the triumph she had obtained over her sister. The mystery of the road with its gossamer veil of mist filled her with an unfed sense of anticipation.

"What if something should come of my walk to-night?" she said to herself, and did not know what to expect.

A man came striding out from the gloom with long steps, and she shrank away from him as he passed and she recognised his tall athletic figure. His presence frightened her a little, for what may one not expect from a man who does not go to church, who fears no God, and does not wear a tall hat on Sundays?

The poor little Tomtit perked her head round when he

was gone, and breathed more freely because Gabriel Lyne, the Infidel of Windlehurst, had passed without taking the slightest notice of her.

She would have been very startled if she could have known what was in the young man's thoughts. That he had come out for a sharp walk because he was restless and could not work at the book he was writing. That he was restless because, for some inscrutable reason, he could not dismiss from his mind the beautiful devout face of a nun-like girl whose honest grey eyes had met his for one moment pleasantly. The book he was writing was a vigorous onslaught on some of the Christian dogmas, and the thought of the girl he had met in the Rectory garden wove itself in with his arguments, and made him dissatisfied with what he had done. How gentle he had been, how tolerant of the intolerable doctrines which had so evidently laid their pernicious hold on his Nun, making her afraid to enjoy the sunshine and beauty round her or to wear a dress that suited her. The pity of it justified his book, but the thought of her did not help him to write it. It sent him dreaming instead.

He would have looked at Miss Iphigenia if he had guessed that the Nun was her niece. He might even have made some excuse for speaking to her, and have frightened the little lady out of her wits. But, as it was, the little Tomtit went on safely, giving her thoughts again to the unknown something which she felt was to happen and bring some change into her uneventful life.

Was it that she would be "converted" at the service? Miss Iphigenia shrank from the thought, as of something linking her with wicked, and, what was worse, with poor people. Surely she was too respectable to be converted. She had not even imagined that it was possible to her, when she went to church regularly every Sunday, and behaved herself as an ordinary orthodox lady should, until Angela had come into the house with her religiousness which was so different from her own, making her wonder whether she was quite safe in taking her seat in heaven for granted. It was rather strange that Angela's advent and the misgivings it caused had been followed almost immediately by a religious revival in the village—a revival due

to the special services which the Rector was holding. Everybody was talking of "conversion," and daily there ran round the village a rumour of some fresh victim to the Canon's eloquence, who had sought audience with him, become a communicant or taken up some branch of church work in consequence of his impassioned appeals to his flock to live new lives. Young Gateacre, the Squire's brother and one of the wildest young men in the neighbourhood, had sought admission to the choir. Miss Denby, the dressmaker, who was suspected of having had a past, had taken up Sunday-school teaching; and even the young man who delivered the milk at the Lodge had stopped to talk to Susannah about her soul while he filled her basin. Susannah said that he certainly gave better measure. And so the wonder of the Canon's revival preaching had spread and filled the church every evening with interested listeners, each half hoping and half afraid that some new mysterious sensation would come over them and land them in the ranks of the converted.

## CHAPTER IV

THE church was crammed when Iphigenia reached it, and she was provided with a chair near the bottom of the central aisle. She wondered whether her sister had arrived early enough to secure their own pew, which was just under the pulpit, and after mechanically hiding her bowed face for five seconds in her handkerchief, she stood up with the rest of the congregation, who were singing the last hymn before the sermon, and craned her neck in an attempt to catch sight of her. She was too short to do so, and would not have thought of acting so indecorously if she had been in her own pew. The strangeness of her position on a chair in the aisle surrounded by a crowd of strangers—for people had come over from Barnwood and the villages round for the excitement of Canon Presyllett's preaching—prevented her feeling that she was in church at all, and, while it lessened in her the mechanical reverence of habit, left her more prepared for the reception of a new emotion.

Somebody lent her a hymn-book just as the last verse was being sung. It was Newman's "Lead Thou me on," and, with unconscious respect for its sweetness, the people around her had left it alone, and listened reverently to the performance of the choir, of whose white surplices Miss Iphigenia could just gain a glimpse up the crowded aisle. It was a well-trained choir for a village church, and the sweet sadness of the hymn affected her as it soared with pathetic cadence to the carved roof and died away with its last cry of hopeful anticipation among the sculptured angels dark with age.

The light died with it, for, as the hymn ended, a turn of the clerk's hand in the vestry had sent every gas-jet



down to a flickering point, and every eye in the building turned to the one glow of light where the white-robed figure of the Rector stood illuminated by the candles in the pulpit high above the heads of the hushed crowd.

It was more silent than if there had been less sound. For the suppressed rustle of an occasional hymn-book or dress made one feel how many individual silences made up the hush that had come over the expectant congregation.

Canon Presyllett never looked so impressive as in the pulpit, his ungainliness of figure concealed by his surplice, his thin face purified by the glow of spiritual enthusiasm which showed through it.

Miss Iphigenia sighed as she gazed at him, and hoped that Prudence was not in the pew just under the pulpit, where he would see her, and perhaps think that she herself had stayed away through carelessness. It was impossible for him to see her own face as she sat at the bottom of the dark church, and she determined that after the service she would try and find some opportunity of letting him know that she had been present.

What a beautiful preacher he was. His words without apparent effort reached to the farthest end of the church, and still sounded low and persuasive, as if he were addressing one person only. Miss Iphigenia, like the majority of persons who listen to sermons, busied her mind wondering who that person could be. As a matter of fact, in the beginning of the address the preacher himself was thinking of the Squire. For his subject was our duty to others, and he was declaring with impassioned words that the rightness or wrongness of an action cannot be determined until we have thought of its effect upon those around us.

"However great a right we may seem to have to take any course of action," he said, "there is no right at all, in God's eyes, unless it is the course which tends to the spiritual welfare of our fellows."

With unusual hardihood for a nineteenth-century Christian, he had chosen as his text the injunction, which they tacitly agree to ignore, about turning the other cheek to the smiter; and he contrasted with persuasive eloquence the puny triumph

which comes to a man when he feels that he has avenged himself, and the real glorious triumph of one who has scorned his natural right to self-defence, and influenced for good a human soul by doing so.

As he went on Iphigenia began to think of Prudence, and wondered whether she felt quite comfortable under the address. For Prudence was always thinking of her rights, and never gave in.

The little woman began to feel a keen enjoyment in the thought of how Prudence must be taking the indictment to herself, and how her conscience must be pricking her; quite unconscious of the fact that Prudence was at that moment thinking how admirably it applied to Iphigenia herself, and regretting that her sister was not there to hear it.

"Oh! my dear brothers and sisters," said the glorified Canon, stretching out his surpliced arms in a tender appeal, "if for one moment you could look at your struggle for self-assertion with the eye of God, and see how insignificant and paltry are its greatest conquests. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,' is your cry, and you forget that while you are struggling for it, you are losing the opportunity of ministering to the soul of your antagonist. What is it when you stand with the dead tooth and the dead eye in your hand, victorious, if you know that in struggling for it you have let the soul of your brother slip down into Hell? You are quite fair, you say, and it is your right. That is what the Roman soldiers said at the foot of the Cross. They were only enjoying their legal right in sharing the garments of Christ, and cast lots fairly, so that nobody would suffer injustice. They were quite fair." He thrilled out the word with an intonation which made everybody in the church think fairness a crime. Then his voice sank low again as he went on, with a sweep of the hand that like a magnet drew a thousand eyes with it towards the western window with its stained representation of the Crucifixion dimly moonlit: "Behind them on the Cross hung the Redeemer of mankind, suffering for their sins and ours, offering the peace and bliss of Paradise even to the thief at His side; but they could not spare time to regard or

think of Him, lest they should lose their paltry right in a few yards of cloth. It is the same to-day; Christ is ever revealing Himself to us, but we have not time to look or to let our fellows look, lest for one moment they should forget what we call our rights. We shut our eyes to the suffering of the Saviour, to join in our miserable squabbles over objects even more paltry than a seamless coat."

Miss Iphigenia's eyes came down from the cross in the window and wandered, in a search that was all desire and no hope, for a glimpse of her sister's face in the listening crowd. She could not find it, of course, but she was very anxious to see from Prudence's expression whether her conscience was not disturbed by the remembrance of the old lace which she had insisted on dividing into equal shares, although it made it practically useless for both of them, and Iphigenia herself had the prior claim to it, through having discovered it put away in the old press and forgotten.

Even if she had found the face she sought, its expression would have been unreadable in the semi-darkness, and Iphigenia turned her eyes once more on the preacher.

She started and flushed guiltily as she did so, for the Canon seemed to be looking directly at her, and his gaunt finger pointed right over the congregation at her, as he went on, with a quick change to his conversational persuasiveness.

"I know what you are thinking, what you are saying to yourselves—that if others would forego their rights, you would be ready to do so. But it is for you to set the example. You must not think of what others are doing. Your only duty is to obey God's command yourself."

Iphigenia sat with her round little brown eyes riveted on his face like those of a startled bird. He had read her thoughts, and was telling her that it was *her own* conscience she must think of, and not Prudence's; that *she* must suppress herself, and struggle no more for her rights; that *she* ought to have given the lace up to Prudence to make a fichu, instead of expecting it to be given to herself.

The perfectly accidental direction of the clergyman's finger towards her had brought to her a sudden new realisation of her own imperfections.

For the first time in the course of the sermon, if not in the course of her life, she took to herself a denunciation from the pulpit, and sat no longer with the one duty of deciding for which among her friends and acquaintances each denunciation was intended. She was no longer a juryman, but the prisoner in the dock.

What was it that was required of her? She listened eagerly, breathing more freely when the preacher changed the direction of his glance, but unable to let her thoughts go back to the question of what Prudence ought to do.

The Canon was laying down lines of conduct suggested by the text he had chosen, making now and then a simple homethrust, but too often translating his ideas into that conventional Hebrew form to which she was accustomed, and which made them as beautiful and unintelligible to her as a Latin chant sung in a Roman Catholic cathedral.

But it did not matter to Iphigenia very much now what the Canon said she ought to do, for she saw it so plainly, and it meant the changing of her whole line of conduct.

When Prudence and she were opposed—and they were opposed fifty times a day—she must no longer strive to show her sister that she was wrong and she herself right. She must simply give in, even to injustice. The first thing that Prudence would do when she got home would be to declare that Angela ought not to have been left in the house alone. Was she to lock up in her bosom all the arguments with which she had justified to herself her visit to church, and admit tamely that Prudence was right? Surely she could not do it.

And still it was a duty. She did not look for an incentive to its performance, any more than she would have asked a reason for washing her hands if she had suddenly realised that they were dirty. She was as accustomed to doing her duty as she was to being clean, and to see an imperfection in her conduct was tantamount to wishing to alter it.

It was the effort, the cost, which terrified her.

She tried to think it out practically; to imagine herself acting as the inspired preacher said that she ought to act. She pictured herself meeting Prudence on her return home,

listening to her reproaches with silent resignation and sweetness. How astonished her sister would be, how perfectly at a loss.

A gleam of hope flashed into the old maid's heart as she began to realise that it would place her on a higher pedestal than her sister, and make all Prudence's triumphs worthless. What pleasure could Prudence gain from the constant use of the top hat-peg, if she gave it up to her freely? As the Canon had said, it was a petty and unsatisfying conquest after all, and not to be compared for a moment to the pleasure of knowing that she herself was doing God's will and acting from a higher motive than her sister.

The picture she had conjured up became alluring. She, serene and peaceful with the knowledge that she was doing right; Prudence, ever striving for little triumphs which she could not enjoy. It would cost her very little: she would have to perform a few more duties, and bear a few more expenses for breakages and other things about which they usually disputed; but Iphigenia knew that Prudence was too just and fair, although she was on a so much lower spiritual platform, to let her bear much more than her share of either duty or expense.

She had not the slightest realisation, of course, of the fact that she was thinking the matter out in this practical manner, and deciding from which course of action she could get the greater happiness. The mind of man conceals its springs of action from itself very carefully—with good reason. The little old maid fondly imagined that she was comparing a practical self-pleasing course of action with a perfectly transcendental one from which she could look for no earthly satisfaction except in the knowledge that she was pleasing God. She thought that her choice of its own volition was making the decision between her own will and that of Jesús, and at the end of the service she remained long on her knees, in an emotional abandonment which prevented her wondering, as she had done on entering, whether the floor was dusty and would injure her dress, assuring her Saviour that from that moment she gave herself to Him wholly, and praying for strength to fight against her own worldly inclinations.

She would have remained longer—for the intoxication of religious emotion is as pleasant as the intoxication of love or wine—but her chair was in the aisle, and people were already crowding out past her and finding the kneeling figure in the way.

She rose with a dazed, unreal, happy feeling, and, with the idea of seeking Prudence at once and telling her what had happened, tried to stem the current coming down the aisle. The current was too strong, however, and a thought had occurred to her that she would show the change in her heart by action rather than speech. She would surprise Prudence by her resignation before she mentioned the cause, and, with this happy idea in her mind, the little woman struggled slowly out of church and hastened home.

It was possible that Prudence had escaped from the church first by the other door, but it was not probable. She usually waited until the aisle had ceased to be crowded, and Iphigenia hoped that she would be home first, to make the initial sacrifice which had suggested itself to her mind, and surprise her sister by leaving the top peg of the hall-stand free for her hat and cloak when she came home. She would also get supper ready if Susannah had not arrived—a task which, in the old time before her “conversion,” would certainly have led to a dispute.

The mist had cleared away during the service, and the road and fields were bathed in moonlight. The little old maid felt in a vague way that it was an allegory of the change that had taken place in herself. All the petty plotting and finesse which had cobwebbed her mind and character in the past were swept away, and her every duty was clear and distinct now. She had seen God, as the river down in the meadows saw the moon and found itself, without effort, no longer something dark and meaningless, but a clear line of silver placidity.

She felt thrilled with a noble enthusiasm as she walked up the gravel path and opened the door, and a happy smile was on her lip as she approached the hall-stand.

But it died away suddenly and a look of perplexity took its place. It seemed that Prudence had reached home before

her after all, for her hat and cloak were hanging in the hall, and, wonder of wonders, they were on the second peg. For the first time in her knowledge of her sister, Prudence had come in first and left the top peg free. It was not unfortunate that such an accident had happened, for it left her free to show the change which had come over her. With the smile once more on her lip, Iphigenia moved her sister's things to the top peg, and hung her own on the lower one.

Then she hastened into the kitchen to carry in the supper things before Susannah arrived, and once more her face fell. The supper had been laid. Of course Angela had thought of it, she said to herself; and she had to pause and think of some other means of satisfying her new lust for sacrifice.

It was not difficult; the house was full of battle-fields. War had waged for a fortnight over an old chest that, for some inscrutable feminine reason, was supposed to need re-arrangement. The contents belonged principally to Prudence, but Prudence had produced her diary to show that she had performed the duty on the last occasion when it was supposed to be necessary, twelve months before; and as it was a duty which could not be handed over to Susannah, a deadlock had ensued, and the Tomtits, with their usual habit, had argued for days over a task that would employ them about ten minutes.

Iphigenia glanced at her watch. She would just have time to arrange the chest before supper, and she went upstairs silently. Seeing a light in Angela's room as she passed, she called in to thank her for laying the supper. She was going to be very sweet to everybody now. Her niece was still poring over Thomas à Kempis, and looked up with far-away gaze.

"Oh! I think that Aunt Prudence laid supper," she said, with a touch of impatience in her voice at being brought down from the consideration of the divine to such mundane affairs. "She went into the dining-room, and began moving the things, as soon as I unlocked the door for her, ten minutes ago."

Iphigenia went away wondering. Was Prudence trying to make a martyr of herself to render her own offence in leaving the house to Angela seem worse? She lighted a candle and went on to the lumber-room, stepping silently past her sister's room, so that she might have some work of abnegation to show her before they met.

She pushed open the door of the lumber-room gently, and then started back, almost dropping her candle. For, kneeling on the floor, with a candle beside her, on the bare boards, was Prudence herself, rearranging the disputed chest.

She did not appear to notice Iphigenia's entrance, and the seeker after sacrifice stood with her little mouth agape, silent and wondering.

"Prue," she said gently; and the Tomtit on the boards perked its head round quickly. But her face did not fill with reproach or indignation, as Iphigenia had expected. Instead she smiled sweetly.

"Oh, it is you, dear," she said, with a change in her usually sharp voice, which increased her sister's wonder. "I was just putting the things right in the chest. But I will leave it and finish it after supper if you are waiting."

"I was just thinking that I would do it myself," said the seeker after sacrifice, her voice rendered less sweet than her sister's by the regretful consciousness that she had been robbed of every opportunity of showing the change that had taken place in her heart.

"I ought to have tidied the box. It was my turn," she said, making an effort to humble herself.

"But the things are nearly all mine," said Prudence as humbly. "I ought not to have expected you to do it."

"And you have laid supper too," said Iphigenia wonderingly.

"Yes, dear. I thought that you would be tired when you came in, and I was not very tired myself."

She spoke with a gentle resignation which suggested that she was actually worn out, and Iphigenia's face unconsciously assumed an air of weariness as she answered—

"I am sure that you are more tired than I am, dear. You must let me finish this work, and lie down until supper."



The same look of bewildered surprise which had been on Iphigenia's face from the moment that she entered the house, was reflecting itself in that of her sister as she rose from her kneeling position.

"Have you felt a change too, Fidge?" she asked wonderingly. "I am so glad, dear."

She took her sister's hands in hers and kissed her, and Iphigenia stood silent, unable to reply. She was trying to say that she was glad her sister had passed through the same blessed experience as herself, but could not. It was so different from what she had expected. Without trying to analyse her feelings, she knew that half the brightness had gone out of the new life, and felt ashamed of knowing it.

"You must go and lie down for a little while now, dear, and let me finish the box," she said, with a determined struggle for the self-sacrifice which had been denied her at every turn; but Prudence smiled with Christian resignation, and insisted on finishing her martyrdom.

They were arguing about it when their niece opened her door five minutes later, and Angela did not guess from their voices what a wonderful change had taken place in the heart of each. She thought it was one of their old squabbles.

## CHAPTER V

As a novelist may be affected to laughter and tears by his own creations, so it is possible for a preacher to be influenced by a sermon which he has delivered himself; and among the many people who left the church after Canon Presyllett's sermon with minds full of self-questioning which his words had quickened, was to be counted the Canon himself.

In the midst of the homily which he had directed specially to the Squire, Gateacre's own arguments against his celibacy had returned for reconsideration in the light of the principle he was enunciating. Nothing was right in God's eyes, however right it might appear in itself, if it was harmful to the spiritual welfare of others. What about his celibacy if it interfered with his spiritual influence in the parish and was a stumbling-block to the ladies of his congregation?

"An unmarried clergyman," the Squire had said to him over their hasty dinner, "seems to me to cause more envy and strife among the ladies of his congregation by the very fact of his existence among them than he removes by the whole of his preaching."

Was it possible that he ought therefore to marry, and, by lowering his personal holiness, increase his spiritual usefulness in the world? It was a terrible question to decide, complicated as it was by the growling of the Beast in him, which scented good to itself from the debated sacrifice to usefulness.

At the basis of every man's thoughts are ideas so deep down that they are never questioned or thought of as opinions at all. When a man gets down to them, he feels himself face to face with Divine truth. That is why Divine truth is so different to different men. It was among the unquestioned

Divine truths in Canon Presyllett's mind that purity was continence. Starting from this unquestioned basis, marriage was, of course, simply a comparative form of impurity, a sin when compared with the perfect purity of celibacy, a virtue only when compared with worse forms of impurity, and, as such, allowed to all who were not holy enough to be perfectly pure.

He had clung to his perfect purity passionately against the promptings of the flesh. There had been lapses, it is true, especially in his younger days, atoned for in an agony of self-abasement and contrition; but the good man had never stooped to acknowledge that perfect purity was impossible for him, and to accept the compromise allowed to the weak by God and the Church. He would have felt himself unfitted for his post if he had done so. A priest must set himself a higher ideal than that compassionately allowed to his flock.

This more or less unconscious introduction into his scheme of thought of two categories for good actions, those that were allowable and those that were right, made his present mental struggle a difficult one.

Just as it was right to remain a celibate, but allowable to marry, so it was right to sacrifice everything for the spiritual welfare of his parish, but allowable to make certain concessions to his own spiritual welfare.

Was he to let his perfect purity detract from his perfect usefulness, or to let his greater usefulness detract from his perfect purity?

He was suffering from the unavoidable weakness of a man who sets before himself too high an ideal, and finds himself, in every practical question which arises in his mind, making a choice not between right and wrong, but between two comparative wrongs. At the unquestioned background of his beliefs was the idea that every human instinct was opposed to God. God did not wish him to eat, drink, sleep, or perform any natural function that had in it any physical pleasantness. The creed would have been simple enough had it not been accompanied by a contradictory belief that God did not wish him to die, but to preach about Him.

Thus, although eating was a sin in itself, it became an allowable sin when it was necessary for the maintenance of the strength he needed in order to remain alive and preach. The performance of every natural function, the satisfaction of every human desire, had to be fought for by a similar circular path of casuistry. It was God's will that he should preach about Him everywhere and at all times, but if he was fanatical nobody would listen, hence a Divine permission for a certain deference to etiquette and good breeding, for chatting about the weather, and taking occasional cups of tea with his parishioners. Sins, but sins that were allowable because they were necessary to virtues.

It is the creed of Christendom, although the majority of its adherents lay much greater stress on the sinfulness of dying than on the sinfulness of living.

Canon Presyllett was made an ascetic by his greater realisation of the sin of living; and the mental debate in his mind ended as all mental debates do, by his determining on the course which pleased him most. With his peculiar cast of thought he clung to his purity, and silenced the Beast and the suggestion of his sermon together.

He had taken a sharp walk after church, and came back to the Rectory quite determined against marriage.

When he sat down to his ascetic supper of dry bread and water, there was a letter lying on his plate which had come by the evening post. He opened it hastily when he saw the crest of Lord Winlay on the envelope. For it was from Winlay that he had received the living of Windlehurst, and he looked to him for further benefits. They had been friends at college together, and although his Lordship was a worldly man, their friendship had continued, a fact which was less to be wondered at perhaps on Canon Presyllett's side than on Winlay's.

There is nothing that the mind revolts against more strongly than waste of material, and the Rector of Windlehurst was conscious of gifts which were wasted on a country parish. His worldly ambition joined hands with his eagerness to do God's service in making him desire a larger church to fill with his eloquence, and he was hoping that

his old college friend would prove an instrument in God's hand to increase the sphere of his usefulness. He opened the instrument's letter with eagerness, therefore, and read with a grave face what Winlay had written with a twinkle in his eye.

"The rumour is true which you have heard," said the letter; "the vicar of St. Catherine's, Kensington, is going to commit suicide, and has resigned his living to go and preach to the niggers. I have mentioned your name to my friend as you wished, and he seems inclined in your favour. But, unfortunately, Delverton is a fellow who takes his responsibilities to heart, and reckons to consider the needs of the parish, and he seems to consider your celibacy a great drawback. It appears that the late vicar had a wife, who was more energetic in the place than her husband, and who leaves a hundred Dorcas societies and boys' institutes and such-like things waiting for a head. Delverton seems to think the parish is more anxious for a good vicar's wife than a good vicar, and knowing your ideas about marriage, I scarcely felt safe in promising him that you would qualify yourself for the living by taking a wife. Still it would be a pity, old fellow, if you lost such a good chance just for want of a lady. Couldn't you enter into a Platonic partnership with some devoted woman who wants to head a hundred parish societies and things? You could afford to offer her a substantial salary; for the living, as you know, is a good one. If you cannot settle Delverton's doubts and troubles on this score, I am afraid you will lose St. Catherine's; for Delverton, although he would do a good deal for me or a friend of mine, is very hot on his conscience, and his conscience seems to be calling unmistakably for a married vicar.

"I wish you could manage it in some way, old fellow; for if you got the church, it would allow us to see much more of each other, and it would enable you to do more justice to your great gifts than you can in a village parish."

The Canon moistened his dry lips with water, but could not touch the frugal food before him. Before reading the letter he had felt faint with the emotional strain of the service

through which he had passed, but all thought of eating disappeared before the revival of the struggle which had helped to exhaust him after leaving the church.

To a man like Canon Presyllett, worshipping a God distinct from and superior to what he calls nature, a superior God who shows Himself not in the laws of nature so much as in interference with them, a coincidence is a very serious thing. It is the only miracle which remains to encourage his belief in the superior God, and in the Devil, who is also included in his theology.

The difficulty is to decide, in the case of every coincidence, whether it is due to God or Devil, whether it is leading or temptation.

That this renewed attack on his celibacy, coming just at a moment when it was so much in his thoughts, had been arranged by a higher power for a special purpose, the Canon never doubted for a moment. But was that purpose to show him that God wished him to marry, or was it to try him and test his purity?

He rang to have his untouched supper cleared away, and locked himself in his study, lighted only by the moonlight that streamed in colours through the window, to wrestle with the question in prayer and thought.

The real desire to reach his highest point of usefulness as a clergyman had united with his personal ambition to make him desire a wife for parish purposes. The living of St. Catherine's was one which offered great opportunities both of usefulness and advancement. Too often his eloquence had passed, like a rich covey of birds rising before purblind sportsmen, too high above the heads of his rural congregation. He longed for a more enlightened body of hearers, with a marksman for every winged idea that came from his mind, and only in a London church did he hope to find it. How the aristocratic west-end congregation would appreciate him; how much more useful he could be to natures as refined as his own, with no bar of ignorance standing between the soul of his hearer and his own as at Windlehurst. The prospect dazzled him.

And Winlay, in spite of his worldliness and his half-jesting

manner, was very careful never to create a wrong impression. There could be little doubt, from his letter, that the absence of a wife was the one thing which stood between him and the living he longed for.

Spiritual and worldly ambition called out to him together, with a voice so unanimous that it seemed like the voice of spiritual ambition alone, to provide himself with a wife.

The Beast had gone to sleep, silenced by thought and fasting. For one hour, delicious in its sense of holiness, the man was perfectly passionless, and could see even marriage in the white light of duty and sacrifice. His enjoyment of the peace and holiness of his mood was undisturbed by any thought of its transiēce. To have looked for a merely physical explanation of his absence of passion would have been for him an impiety, similar to that of attempting to scientifically explain a miracle or the origin of his beliefs.

Canon Presyllett was never guilty of this impiety.

God had made him pure in answer to prayer and struggle, and henceforth he would serve Him without a thought of the flesh.

He felt very strong to-night, and in his strength a new idea presented itself, which owed its origin no doubt to the half-jesting suggestion of Winlay's letter.

Suddenly, with a clearness that made it surely an illumination from God, he saw in his need for a wife, not an attack on his purity, but an opening for even greater holiness. To be a celibate in the eyes of men was a great thing; to be a celibate in the eyes of God alone, surely that would be a greater. If it was a mark of purity to resist the flesh when the world would see any fall from his high position, how much greater a form of purity it must be to resist the flesh when God alone would know of any fall, when a fall would be only the exercise of a right which the world and the Church held guiltless. He would marry for the sake of his pastoral duties, and still be pure, still be a celibate. The task might be a hard one, but the difficulty, the sharpness of the temptation which would confront him, would add only to the holiness of his sacrifice.

The arrival of Lord Winlay's letter had indeed been a coincidence divinely arranged for his leading.

Accustomed as he was to considering every action a matter between himself and God, an attitude which had led, as in Angela Gaydon, to an unhealthy self-concentration, the Canon had practically decided that it was his duty to go through the form of marriage with some woman, before it occurred to him to wonder whether he could find any woman to take his name and join in his spiritual work on the terms he suggested to himself.

When he began to look at his new resolve—for in the moment of illumination the idea had become a resolve at once—the thought of Angela presented itself with a readiness which showed that the thought of her had been interwoven with his struggle from the first. It was her entrance immediately after the Squire's appeal which had more or less consciously given the renewed war over his celibacy its strength.

He had noticed her in church, and had become interested in her—partly with an interest which he fought against, because it was due to the fairness of her skin and the badly concealed grace of her tall girlish form, partly with an interest which did not shame him, because it was due to her evident devoutness, by the eager sympathy with which she had listened to and appreciated his words.

The same mingled emotions had been in his heart during their interview, and he had been thrilled by the thought of what she was willing to give to God through him, what a charming personality was offered to him to utilise for God's service. He felt much the same emotion which he would have done if a fortune had been left to the church through him. Without any idea of using the bequest for his own selfish enjoyment, his personal appreciation of it would have made him enjoy the pleasure of having it passed through his hands. If, after the interview, Angela Gaydon had either married or devoted herself to the work of another church, he would have felt personally jealous. He intended to use her for God's service alone, but all the same it must be he who must do it.

The thought that he might utilise her for God's service by marrying her, had indeed suggested itself at the moment



that he had touched her ungloved hand; but he had recognised the growling of the Beast, and put the thought away from him quickly.

Now the thought came back as of a holy duty in which the Beast had no part.

He remembered that she had been announced just at the moment when he was telling the Squire that God would raise up a way for him to satisfy the objections of the parish to his celibacy, and this time the coincidence seemed to him the undoubted leading of the Almighty.

It is dangerous to make the Almighty responsible for coincidences.

It is often dangerous to pray. As the Canon threw himself on his knees, thanking Deity for showing him his duty and giving calm after storm, the practical objections and dangers of what he proposed disappeared, and he looked to the future as to a life of holiness and self-denial in which God would ever be at his hand to give him strength.

When the Canon rose faint and dizzy from his knees, and crept upstairs to fall at once into a sleep of complete exhaustion, poor Angela Gaydon's fate was already decided, as far as the Rector of Windlehurst was concerned.

A mile away, Gabriel Lyne had fallen asleep thinking of her.

## CHAPTER VI

WHEN he woke, late in the morning, Canon Presyllett felt some inclination to reconsider his decision of the night before. In the bright light of morning, with the sunshine streaming through the Venetian laths of his uncurtained window across his plain iron bedstead, he began to realise the step in a more practical light than he had done in the moonlit study. He began to fear his strength.

But he put away the plain practical thoughts which came to him, as something weak and worldly. In his highest and holiest mood he had recognised the marriage to be the leading of the Almighty, and there was only danger for him in doubting now, when his thoughts were less pure.

God had spoken clearly in the night. It was impious for him to reopen the question. It seemed to him that his higher nature was warning him against a step that must end in impurity, but the appearance must be a delusion, the tempting of Satan, who tried to make him distrustful of the strength that God would give him.

He tried to accept the question as a finally decided one, and to dismiss it from his mind.

After he had dressed and breakfasted, he turned to his Bible for relief from his thoughts, and, with his religious regard for coincidences, opened the book at hazard.

He saw the leading of Deity again when his eyes fell on the statement of Naaman's permitted compromise with his conscience.

"In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the

house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing. And Elisha said unto him, Go in peace."

The passage was a favourite one of the Canon's, which accounted probably for the fact that the Bible opened at it. The permitted compromise had often formed a welcome precedent for compromises of his own of which his conscience did not altogether approve, but for which he sought the approval of God, and it soothed now certain qualms of conscience he was feeling at the thought of using the marriage ceremony for a purpose of his own, which would make all its wording a mockery.

He was glowing with the consciousness of a Divine approval for his deception, when Angela was announced. She had started for the Rectory immediately after breakfast, in her eagerness to enjoy once more the spiritual pleasure and honour of talking alone with the embodiment of her Christian ideal. She had not found any necessity yet to speak of her visits to her aunts, and hoped that when she did so, she would also be able to announce her determination to take some step which the Canon would doubtless suggest. He had promised to try and think out some way in which she could show the world definitely that her life was devoted to God's service, and a pleasant anticipation filled her of new openings for self-devotion and sacrifice as she knocked with less timidity than on the previous day at the Rectory door and was shown once more into the little anteroom. No visitor was taken direct to the study, where the Rector spent so much time on his knees, and she had to wait some minutes until the clergyman prepared himself for the interview.

The announcement of her arrival had come as a shock to him, although he was expecting it. For, with the knowledge that she had arrived, he realised suddenly the great difference between satisfying his own conscience that an act was right and persuading another person of its rightness.

His voice trembled with nervousness as he answered the maid, telling her that he would see Miss Gaydon in a few minutes, and he locked the door of the study behind her.

But his manner had no trace of nervousness as he wel-

comed her after his prayer. His voice was calm and clear the voice of a man who lived so near to heaven that its intonation had caught something of heaven's serenity.

"My dear child," he said, taking both her hands when they were in the study together, "I am so glad that you have come. I have been giving much thought and prayer to the difficulty you spoke to me about yesterday, and I think—" (he stopped and corrected himself, for it was more than thought, it was a divine inspiration which had come to him)—"and God has raised up a way in which we can help each other, and remove for each other the stumbling-block which at present stands in the way of my spiritual work as well as yours."

He had led her to a chair, and she gazed up at him with enthusiastic gratitude and pleasure.

It was almost the same gratitude which she gave to her Saviour, when she thought of His mercies to her.

That this man, so high and holy, had given thought and prayer to her little difficulties, was a great thing; that he had thought of some means of helping her was a cause for gratitude; but that he had to offer her the inestimable honour of helping him in his own difficulties—it was almost too great for comprehension. Surely he must be saying it only to flatter her.

Her eyes glowed with pleasure, and her smile thrilled him with a sense of enjoyment which he did not explain to himself, but which helped him to go on.

"The proposal which I have to make to you will surprise and perhaps startle you," he said, still standing and looking down at her beautiful face flushed with excitement, "but I have seen in it the clear leading of God, and I trust that you will accept the proposal as from Him rather than from me."

"I feel that anything you propose must be right," she said truly enough; and her confidence, which would have made some men diffident about themselves, only gave him more encouragement.

"The proposal is that we should form a partnership for doing our Lord's work," he went on in his low persuasive

voice. "Although we spoke directly to each other for the first time yesterday, still we know something of each other. You have sufficient confidence in me, Miss Gaydon, to ask my advice on the subject which is nearest to you. You are aware of my work and life here, and I have heard something of yours. Already the report of your labours among the poor in the parish has reached me, although you have been with us so short a time. I have recognised in you a devout soul struggling towards an ideal of holiness and unworldliness greater than that which the best of my flock set themselves, and the fact induced me to make a confidence to you which I should have made to few of my parishioners."

"I felt honoured by your confidence," she said quickly; and he smiled sublimely.

"As I felt honoured by yours. But we must not speak of honour. It is only right that there should be full confidence between those who have the one aim of serving God aright. It is because I know you are so earnest in that aim that I venture to make to you this proposal which He Himself seems to have put into my mind."

"And the proposal?" she asked, thrilled by his treatment of her as a spiritual equal. "I do not quite understand. You speak of a partnership." There was perplexity in her manner. Perhaps a faint suspicion of what such a proposal from any other man than the celibate clergyman would have foreshadowed had touched her mind in spite of herself.

"Yes, a partnership in good works," he said gently; "that we should join hand in hand in our labours in this parish, or in a larger to which our Master may see fit to send me, sharing one roof and one name."

"You mean——" She half rose from her chair, confronting him with wide-open eyes in which incredulity struggled with her reverence for him.

He put his hand on her shoulder, and looked down with a grave sweetness into her startled face.

"My dear child, do not misunderstand me. I know that for you, as for me, marriage as the world understands marriage is a thing not to be thought of, something that would serve but to draw away our hearts and thoughts from the service

of our Lord, a sinful sacrifice of the spirit to the flesh. I would not for a moment propose it to you, any more than I could propose it to myself."

"But without marriage——" she said, her face aflame, and could not go on. She could not help thinking of Mrs. Grundy, and felt half afraid, so great was her reverence for his goodness, that she might be falling short of the holiness he ascribed to her by doing so.

He answered with a studied calm.

"Without going through a form to satisfy the world, that partnership is of course impossible. But by going through that form we should each find that the difficulties which at present hamper us both would disappear. Do not judge the idea too quickly," he went on, alarmed by the expression of her face. "Lay it before God with prayer, as I have done, and perhaps you will see it as I see it, in the form of a duty which He requires from us to enable us each to do His service more completely."

"But I am afraid that I do not understand," she said, becoming distressed. "Do we make marriage any different by calling it a form, by saying that it is not a marriage as the world——"

"Not by calling but by making it so," he said, biting his lip. He had expected her to see more quickly exactly what he proposed, and he began to wonder with what degree of bluntness she would force him to speak. "My idea is that we should be married in the eyes of man, unmarried in the eyes of God," he said, making another attempt. "Do you not see, my dear child, that by nominally becoming my wife, you will satisfy the voices around you, which you find so distracting? Marriage with another will have become legally impossible to you, and you will be freed at once from the pain of hearing it suggested to you either as a duty or a natural ambition. For myself the gain will be even greater, for by one action I should wipe away a hundred difficulties which arise in my parish work through the fact that I am unmarried. The world would be satisfied, but for us there would be no change. You would take my name and live under my roof, thus removing yourself from

the worldly distractions which surround you. But that would be the full extent of our concession to the world. The Rectory would be your convent, my monastery, where, having satisfied the world, we could still preserve in actual fact that highest state of purity, the unmarried state, which our Lord expects from His faithfullest disciples."

His voice was full of persuasive eloquence. It was the voice in which he had preached the sermons which had done so much to persuade her of his great holiness, and the association had its effect on her attitude to his suggestion.

In the first realisation of his meaning, which was no longer doubtful to her, her natural healthiness of mind, which her girlish flush of religious ardour had left as yet unwarped and little distorted, had enabled her to see in his proposal something unnatural and unholy, something underhand and deceitful; but his manner, his air of sublimity, made her ashamed of the light in which the proposal suggested itself to her. She felt that she was looking at it in a worldly way.

Like every woman, she was affected more by personality than principle. To her certain views were right chiefly because they were held by certain people whom she admired or loved. Her creed was a record of the personal influences which had surrounded her. As she had told the Canon, it was the memory of her dead mother which had kept her in the English Church. It was not any comparison of the principles which made it different from Romanism. In the same way, her tendency to Romanism was accounted for by her deep devotion to the morbidly self-centred French girl with whom she had lived for two years, and who had just taken the veil. Robbed of Cecile's influence, Angela had looked round for another leader, and had chosen the Rector of Windlehurst, partly because his views agreed more closely than those of anybody else in her new home with the views she had derived from Cecile, partly because of his eloquence, his appearance as he stood transfigured in the light of the pulpit candles.

The whole tendency of her belief was to make her distrust

any natural emotion or instinctive thought, and her first repulsion to the pseudo-marriage which the Canon suggested was perfectly natural and instinctive.

The very name of marriage had recalled those vague dreams which lie in the background of a girl's thoughts, a deep well of romance from which the mists rise in mysterious shapes to fill their thoughts at times with a vague happy fairyland of anticipation. Cecile's morbid influence had made for Angela the well an unholy one, to be lidded heavily with holiness. But the mists would still rise at times, and they had touched her thoughts with romance at the word of marriage.

For the first time she looked at the Canon as a man, comparing him with shadowy ideals of manly beauty, and shrinking from the contrast.

But the thought frightened her. It was this uncontrollable romance about marriage struggling with her devout serenity which had really made her long for some definite binding vow of virginity like Cecile's. Now that it was offered to her, she shrank from it. Surely it must only be a worldly weakness for her dreams which made her do so. The English convent she had prayed for opened its doors. It must be worldliness which made her hesitate to enter it. Was she, after all, too unholy to accept the duty offered her?

She forced back all that was natural and healthy and honest in her thoughts, and tried to see the proposal in a sacred light. Unconsciously she was swayed by emotions which were just as much part of her natural character as her romance.

Her love of her own way and her girlish conceit had woven themselves unperceived in with her devoutness, and had always helped her in her renunciation of the idea of marriage.

She wanted to be always free and independent, and she wanted to know that she was holier than other people, and the pseudo-marriage appealed to both desires.

In the Canon's suggestion she saw the promise of complete freedom and equality. Her marriage would no more pledge her to the obedience which would be distasteful to her than to the love which would be sinful for both. She would live



her own life of devotion to God, undeterred by the sordid duties of domesticity and maternity, and in doing so she would retain the pleasing knowledge that all her aims were higher than those of other girls.

She was dazzled by the honour paid her in being chosen out by such a man as the Canon to share his home and assist his purpose.

Her honesty still rebelled, however.

"Would it not be a deception," she asked, "to pretend to the world that we are married?"

Her slender hands clasped and unclasped nervously, but the look of startled fear was dying out of her eyes, and leaving in them their customary devotional calm. He was relieved to find, from her question and manner, that she understood his proposal, and that it was beginning to appeal to her. He had been closely watching her clear expressive face, which almost enabled him to see the thoughts that passed through her mind.

The question she asked now was one he had expected, and prepared for by an elaborate line of casuistry—casuistry by which he had satisfied his own conscience. Their marriage would be not so much a pretended one as a spiritual one, of which the other was an emblem. On its human side the marriage ceremony was a pledge that two people devoted themselves to each other to the exclusion of any other alliance, and, as the only means of pledging themselves to the world, to exclude any other alliance was not a pretence at all. Although it would not give the world a true idea of their attitude to each other, still it would give them a true idea of their attitude to others, and in this manner would deceive them less than their remaining unmarried would do.

Angela did not sift or examine his arguments. It was enough that he had seen the objection and that his conscience did not revolt. All the respect which she had been accustomed to give to the official exponents of her creed weighed heavy on his side, and she would have felt it a spiritual impertinence to question his decision on a plain question of right and wrong. He did not give her time to weigh his arguments if she wished.

"Let us pray for God's guidance, that we may accept His leading in all things," he said, as he finished speaking.

Unconsciously prayer had become a trick of argument with him, both in the lonely debates he had with his own conscience, and in arguments with those who came to him for advice. In his dispute with the Squire about the reading-room, it had enabled him to assume the authority of God for his own belief. In his self-questioning, it had helped him to forget in emotion a discomfiting scruple. He used it now to gloss over in the girl's mind the deception that they were to practise.

In an eloquent appeal to the Deity, he led away her thoughts from the means by which her liberty was to be obtained to its results when, left alone by the world, she would live an undisturbed life of spiritual thought and devotion to God's service.

As Angela listened her doubts disappeared, and she wondered at the impiety which had made her question for a moment the holiness and right of the step which this man of God had proposed to her.

With her scruples swept away, the prospect became more entrancing than ever. Instead of the daily pettiness of the life at Lilac Lodge, with its constant distraction to her highest thoughts and emotions, she pictured herself in the serene calm of the Rectory with its devotional incentives. In her mental picture every room was like the study, everything had the air of an old cathedral. It seemed possible to live in such a place, as in a convent, with no thought of the world. And this ideal of holiness, whose prayer sounded divinely in her ears, would be always at hand to help her in every spiritual difficulty. With his wonderful and Christ-like condescension he would use her aid in his life and in his work. She could devote herself without other thought to the poor and suffering. Surely it was the ideal life of holiness that she had longed for.

Their faces were both illuminated when they rose from their knees.

The Canon took her hand with a paternal smile.

"My dear sister in God," he said gravely and sweetly,

"you must think over what I have said. I do not ask you to decide now or even quickly. Think and pray over it, and give me your decision."

"I would rather give it now, if I may," she said quietly. The thought of her impious misgivings, and a half fear that they would return when she left the cathedral-like study and the beatified presence of the clergyman, had rendered her eager to catch at the life of holy calm held out to her, while she could realise it in its right light as a duty.

"And your decision?" he asked, almost sternly, the light fading from his face. It leapt back as she answered, almost in a whisper—

"I will be your wife in the eyes of the world, Canon Presyllett. I feel that it will be a great honour and a great help to me."

He took both her hands, conquering an impulse to kiss her—an action which his conscience would have allowed, but which might have frightened her.

"My dear sister, I felt sure that you would see it as I do, as the leading of God."

When she was gone the Beast spoke.

"That is all right," he said.

"But you are going to be repressed and tortured," said the Angel, but his voice was a timid and fearful one.

## CHAPTER VII

ANGELA owed the fact that she had been permitted to pay her morning visit to the Rectory without curiosity or question on her aunts' part, to their recent conversion.

The rivalry of the sisters in good works and self-sacrifice kept them too busy to pay any attention to their niece.

Iphigenia, who had found herself on the previous evening robbed of every opportunity of self-abnegation, rose early in the morning, determined to atone for her failure and score as many successes as possible over Prudence during the day.

There was the garden to be watered, a duty which the old maids always performed themselves, each being careful to water only her own side of the dividing path, and taking pains not to give a drop of moisture to her sister's half.

It would be a sign of the change in her heart indeed if Prudence came down to find the whole garden watered, and Iphigenia hurried into her straw hat and gardening gloves. But when she opened the front door, there was Prudence with a smile of conscious goodness watering Iphigenia's own side of the plot.

The little old maid could have cried with vexation, and it was all that she could do to greet her sister with the sweetness which one Christian should show to another. It was little satisfaction to her to begin work on Prudence's side of the garden, especially as she had not time to complete it before Prudence was ready to assist.

After breakfast she hurried into the drawing-room to dust her sister's ornaments there before her own, but in her excitement to get it done before Prudence suspected what was going on, she dropped a little pot-Cupid of her sister's, which gave Prudence when she came in an opportunity for

showing a holy resignation. They came very near one of their old worldly quarrels, disputing which should be permitted to sacrifice herself and bear the expense of the breakage.

The morning was very much like other mornings, except that Prudence did all Iphigenia's work and Iphigenia all Prudence's. They disputed a little more than usual, but the dispute was always over the question which should deny herself most.

Once a week one of the sisters walked the ugly three miles of highroad which joined Windlehurst to Barnwood, the nearest town, in order to shop.

To-day it was Prudence's turn, and Iphigenia dressed for the unwelcome expedition half-an-hour before her sister would think of doing so.

Prudence flushed when she came down with her hat on, with a flush that would have meant angry surprise in one whose heart had not been changed. There was a touch of vinegar tasting through the sweetness of her voice when she spoke.

"You are going for a walk, dear?"

"I thought I would go over to Barnwood for you, dear," said Iphigenia, feeling that it was easier than it had been since her conversion to speak sweetly and gently.

"But you went last Thursday," said Prudence sharply.

"Yes, dear, but that does not matter at all. I am sure that you must be tired after working so hard all the morning for me, and the road is such a tiring one."

"But it is just as tiring for you, dear, and you have done a great deal for me."

The two Tomtits faced one another, with round eyes and little mouths, equally full of determination. Iphigenia had made up her mind that this time she would have her own way and deny herself at all costs.

Prudence recognised the fact and changed her tactics. Her voice became as sweet and resigned as her sister's.

"Very well, dear, if you are so anxious to go. There were one or two reasons—but it does not matter; next week will do for me. Go, dearest, by all means."

Iphigenia hesitated, her face falling.

"But if you wish to go."

"Oh no; it does not matter at all, dear, thank you," said Prudence resignedly, and she fluttered out of the room before her sister could reply.

Iphigenia, after a few minutes' deliberation, followed her up to her room, and Prudence rose from her knees with the suffering sweetness of a person disturbed in prayer.

"If you really wish to go to Barnwood, dear," said Iphigenia, "do not let me prevent you. I was only thinking of you."

Prudence interrupted her in the last sentence.

"Oh no, it does not matter at all. There are several things I ought to do. The china closet wants cleaning out, and I think you will find the walk a pleasant change after being indoors so much."

"Oh, very well, if you are determined to make a martyr of yourself whatever you do," said Iphigenia, her temper giving way, and she bounced out of the house, with the unpleasant sense that she was suffering a hardship without even the consolation of knowing that she was holy.

Her offer to go to Barnwood had not been prompted entirely by unselfish motives. It offered her a chance of taking a bold step on which she had decided, with less fear of discovery on Prudence's part. If she had allowed Prudence to go to Barnwood and then started on her own errand, Susannah would be sure to mention the fact when her sister returned, and Prudence's curiosity would make necessary either confession or evasion. But if she performed her errand on her way from Barnwood, Prudence would suspect nothing. And with instinctive jealousy of her twin, she was very anxious that Prudence should know nothing of the venturesome and questionable thing she was going to do. She had decided to accept the invitation given from the church pulpit, and call on Canon Presyllett at the Rectory—alone.

She had lain awake half the night tormented by the boldness of the idea, but unable to resist its temptation.

Her thought of a new life had been insensibly connected

with the Canon, and half its anticipated attraction had been due to the feeling that it would bring her closer to him. The white light of holiness loses its whiteness when passed through the crystal even-sided spectrum of impartial analysis. Its constituents are seen to be of many colours. If Miss Iphigenia's new love of holiness had been mercilessly split into component parts, an important one would have been found to be her desire to marry the Rector.

Prudence wished to marry him also, so did every other unmarried woman over the age of thirty in the parish. It was the unavoidable consequence of the conditions under which they lived, and for which they cannot be blamed.

When a girl has passed the age of romance, in which her only thought is of an ideal man in whose company she will spend an ideal existence, she realises that, putting the ideal man and the ideal existence out of the question, she will be happier married than unmarried. Her married friends combine to make her think so. Anxious to gain some credit for themselves for having secured a husband, they agree to treat those who have not done so as their inferiors in some way. The chances are that the unmarried woman is their superior in refinement, and has suffered through having a higher ideal than themselves; but they agree to despise her for the fact. Thus, in addition to the loneliness and aimlessness due to her position, she has to suffer a sense of inferiority to other women, and her state becomes less endurable than that of a woman unromantically married to a man without any particular attractions. When she ceases to think of marrying for romance, she finds that she must marry for comfort. But romance dies only with youth, especially in finer natures, and too often a woman awakes to the practical advisability of matrimony only when she has lost those charms which render her attractive to the majority of men who are looking out for wives. The advent into her small circle of an unmarried man whose character is considered from his position above reproach, whose respectability is guaranteed, and whose duties enable her to form his acquaintance without difficulty, must of necessity come to her in the light of a great opportunity. It could not be otherwise,

and the fact of every old maid in an unmarried clergyman's parish wishing for his hand is no material for contempt or amusement.

A woman's interest in the struggle varies, of course, according to the estimate she forms of her chance of success, and Miss Iphigenia's estimate had always been rather a high one. Her constant fear of her sister's rivalry had tended to make her undervalue that of other opponents, and she sometimes felt as though there were only two things between herself and the name of Mrs. Presyllett. One was the Canon's absurd attitude towards matrimony, against which she never ceased to inveigh; the other was Prudence.

It was the fear lest Prudence might steal an advantage over her which drove her now to the bold step of calling on the Canon to seek his sympathy in the change that had come over her life. It was an offence against the ideas of propriety in which she had been brought up, and which had strengthened in her with her age. Everybody has a tendency to consider heinous those faults which they have no opportunity of committing. It is a method by which we compensate ourselves for loss of opportunity by adding to the virtue of our non-performance. When Iphigenia had no spiritual hopes or difficulties to carry to her Rector, she had been very severe in her condemnation of those who carried them to his bachelor abode; but now—well, she had placed a higher ideal before her than mere respectability, and she wanted to enjoy the advantages of it. Prudence was almost sure to do so if she did not.

She would get through her shopping quickly and call on her return, and she hurried briskly through the village street, where the religious revival had already left some traces.

The local butcher had scrawled up in red letters on a great card in his window: "The Leopard hath changed his Spots"—he had lost custom through his bad reputation in the place—"Christ died for Me;" and underneath: "Prime American Beef, 9d. per lb."

Farther on, the stone-breaker by the wayside had stopped work and seated himself on his heap to read a Testament.

The old maid shivered a little at each sign of a changed



heart, and the respectability which before her conversion had formed nine-tenths of her religion, recoiled from the idea that she was placing herself on the level of the evil-living butcher and the poverty-stricken stone-breaker. She wondered whether in his heart of hearts the Canon himself would respect her more for the possession of an emotion which he was accustomed to seeing chiefly in the less-educated members of his flock. She stood still a little beyond the converted stone-breaker, on the otherwise deserted high-road, her locomotive power run to thought, and there took place in her heart that struggle between the old and the new which the Canon himself had told her would come. It was a struggle of which he had spoken, when the Devil tries to draw back the soul which has started to climb the heights.

"All the people of good family that you know are only respectably and moderately religious," said the Devil. "They go to church, and take a dignified part in parish work, but they do not talk about religion or think about it in their ordinary life. It is only the riff-raff who become fanatical and talk about their souls to other people."

"But the dear Canon is fanatical," said God.

"It is his business," said the Devil. "Bishops and canons are permitted even to mention in an aristocratic drawing-room the fact that they have souls."

"But with the Canon it is no mere profession," said God; "holiness fills all his thoughts, and it is only by becoming holy that a woman can appeal to his sympathies and attract his interest."

The Devil retired at that, and Iphigenia went on firm in her intention of living the new life that would bring her more than she had been in touch with the unmarried Rector. Before, she had felt a barrier of reserve between them, and she saw now clearly what it was. She was worldly, he was holy. Now she had changed, and who knew, perhaps the barrier would be gone.

She tripped along brightly now, preparing her spiritual difficulties for his ear, and elaborating an account of the change in her heart due to his sermon, which would per-

suade him of its greatness without suggesting that her heart had in it much to find fault with before the change. If she said that she had ceased to squabble with Prudence, he might think that she was naturally bad-tempered, and that would not do. She must show him that her temper had always been sweet, but that it had become sweeter.

The mental excitement of it all made her forget half her shopping, but the remembrance of her omissions suggested fresh fields for pious resignation when Prudence blamed her for them, and she did not turn back. There was food for satisfaction in the thought that Prue's new sweetness would be tried to the utmost when she heard that her favourite sardines and the skein of wool she wanted had been forgotten.

Iphigenia walked along briskly and cheerfully, but her step slackened as she neared the Rectory. She glanced anxiously up and down the road, but not a soul was in sight to carry the news of her visit to the village.

Her breath came a little faster than usual, and there was more colour than usual in her cheeks. She tried to open the gate without sound, and its irrepressible click startled her; but the gate had closed behind her, and she must go on. She must walk quickly, or somebody might pass and see her going up the path. The fear drove her forward, and she was half-way up the broad gravel path when the door of the house to which she was making her way opened, and a lady was shown out.

Iphigenia stopped in consternation. She had overlooked the danger of being seen by the other callers whom the Rector must have after his addresses, and the thought of flight suggested itself. But it was too late, the figure was coming down the steps, and as Iphigenia raised her eyes, all her shame turned into indignation. For the lady was Prudence.

Iphigenia's eyes blazed with anger. To think that Prudence should have so far forgotten the ideas of propriety in which they had been bred, as to call on an unmarried man alone. To think that she should call secretly without her knowledge, while she had pretended to be clearing out the

china closet. She knew what it was—Prudence had been trying to steal an advantage over her, and ingratiate herself with the Rector under cover of seeking his spiritual advice. Her feelings were shocked and outraged, and she stood waiting for her sister with a heart full of bitterness.

If there had been time for her to get back to the road unseen, she might have repressed her feelings sufficiently to meet her with grave and kindly rebuke; but Prudence must have already caught sight of her, and might, for all she knew, be ascribing to her pure desire for spiritual help the same ignoble motives which must have prompted her own visit. It was necessary for her to assert herself, and instinctively her mind answered to the need by painting her sister's conduct in the blackest and her own in the whitest colours. She had given up her idea of visiting the Canon at the first sight of her sister, and almost managed to persuade herself that she had never intended to do so.

Prudence came along with her little beak in the air, and Iphigenia sprang towards her excitedly.

"Prudence Gaydon, I am ashamed of you."

"Do not be absurd, Fidge; you are going yourself."

"I am certainly not. And so this is why you drove me to Barnwood and pretended that you were going to clear out the china closet."

"I have finished it, and there is no need to create a scene here. I have something to tell you."

There was none of the morning's sweetness in her tone, and Iphigenia was somewhat appeased by noticing from her face and manner that the visit had not been a satisfactory one. The way in which Prudence promised her news made curiosity crowd out her indignation a little, and she turned to walk with her to the road.

But the indignation was not quite dead yet.

"To think that a sister of mine," she said icily, "should call alone on an unmarried man."

Prudence sniffed.

"My dear Fidge, pray don't alarm yourself. If Canon Presyllett is not married he is engaged, which is much the same thing."

She enjoyed her sister's consternation.

Iphigenia stopped to stare.

"Engaged?"

"Yes; engaged to our niece, Angela Gaydon. She called on him this morning, and promised to marry him."

"Our niece—Angela—to marry—the Rector!"

Iphigenia stood gasping, and her bird-like little brown eyes looked as if they must bolt out.

"Yes; that is the explanation of the young lady's holiness, and of her visiting the sick, and all that nonsense. It seems that the designing girl has been calling on him every day on the pretence of asking his spiritual advice, and pretending to us all the while that she was giving tracts to the poor."

"The minx!" said Iphigenia.

"And to think that she is the child of our own brother," said Prudence.

"And that such a man as Canon Presyllett should be taken in by it."

"A man who pretended that he had religious objections to marriage. Just because she has a pretty face."

"And thinks herself so much better than anybody else," said Iphigenia, whose desire for holiness had owed something to jealousy of Angela's superior calm. "I must say that Canon Presyllett has sunk in my respect."

"I never admired him as a man," said Prudence; and so they went on, forgetting their own quarrels in crying down the two people who had disappointed their hopes.

Only, as they neared home, Iphigenia perked her head in the air.

"Well! I thank Heaven that I have remained a lady and have never run after the Rector," she said; and Prudence, who recognised in the thrust at Angela a subtle one at herself, answered sharply—

"No, dear. I just prevented you in time."

At the gate Prudence stopped to speak to a neighbour, and Iphigenia hastened into the house, thrust her sister's gardening hat, which Susannah had hung thoughtlessly on the top peg of the hall-stand, on the floor, and hung her own

hat and cloak there instead. Then she hastened into her own room and rang for Susannah.

"Please tell Miss Prudence that I am very tired with my long walk and cannot see to the table to-day."

Susannah came back with a message from her sister—

"Please, Miss Prudence says it is your turn to see to the table. She is tired herself, and she never asked you to go to Barnwood."

The old worldly war had begun again

## CHAPTER VIII

THE attitude taken towards the Canon's engagement by the Tomtits was that of all the unmarried ladies in the parish.

The human heart is always providing itself with compensations. When we fail in a desire, there is still satisfaction to be gained from blackening the character of those who have succeeded, and luxuriating in a sense of our superior goodness. It is a universal impulse which makes us do so. It is sufficient to account for the invention of the idea of Hell.

Every woman who had hoped, however feebly, to win the Rector, talked venomously of the girl who had succeeded. They had schemed and failed, they said to themselves, so she must have schemed more to win; and they blazoned abroad their deduction as a fact, without mentioning the reasoning by which they had arrived at it, and every one of them was priding herself on scheming so little.

For the Canon himself they had a gentle pity. They had all agreed that he ought to marry. Now that he proposed doing so, they sighed over his surrender of a high ideal.

The Tomtits took tea with Mrs. Gateacre at the Hall, and carried this feeling with them. The Squire, who ascribed the engagement to his own arguments, began to think that he had made a mistake.

"I am hanged if I make myself a mouthpiece for the parish again," he said to his wife, when the old maids had gone. "Everybody said that Presyllett ought to be a married man, and now that he has promised to oblige them they all seem disappointed."

"They think that he might have chosen somebody more suitable in point of age," said his wife; and the Squire shrugged his broad, plump shoulders.

"What each woman meant, it seems to me, was not that Presyllett should become a married man, but that he should marry herself. I am sorry I spoke a word for them. They are not satisfied. Presyllett is sacrificing his scruples; and then there is the girl—a sweet young thing she seems, who ought to have a man marrying her for love and not for the good of his parish."

"I suppose the Canon must be in love with her," said his wife; but the Squire shook his head.

"I do not think Presyllett is the man to be in love with anybody. He is too much in love with his work for that, and he is sacrificing the girl to it. I have a good mind to tell him that he has no right."

"I do not think that Miss Gaydon will consider herself sacrificed," said his wife. "And, from all I hear, she cannot be a very nice sort of a girl. Did you hear why she did not come here this afternoon? She considers afternoon calls worldly, and had some sick people to visit. I wonder whether she will be quite so pious after she is married."

"She will find the Rectory pretty dull if she is not," said the Squire. "Presyllett is not a bad fellow, of course, but somehow I do not like the idea of his marrying a young girl. To tell the truth, I would rather see her married to young Lyne, if he *is* an infidel."

His wife laughed.

"What a match! Gabriel will never fall in love with a pious young lady."

"He will make a pleasanter lover and husband than Presyllett, though, when he does fall in love."

"Possibly; but you must not forget that your ideas are worldly—in Miss Angela Gaydon's opinion."

The girl's refusal to come to tea rankled in the good lady's mind, or rather, the form in which her aunts had stated the reason for her refusal.

The Squire shrugged his shoulders again.

"Well! I wash my hands of the affair; although it is easy enough to do that after muddling things up. I wish that I had left Presyllett's marriage alone."

Angela herself suffered very little from the animosity which

she had roused against herself by her promise to the Rector. Her conscientious scruples against wasting, in the social dissipation of calls and tea-drinking, time that she might devote to God's service, lifted her out of a den of lions. Many elaborately prepared speeches, calculated to deliver a stab under the guise of polite congratulation, were lost for want of an opportunity to deliver them. When the female wasps who had prepared them buzzed their way into Lilac Lodge, Angela was rarely to be seen. If she was not out visiting the poor, she was in her room devoting her time to prayer and contemplation. Her aunts allowed her her own way in everything, now that she was to leave them. Her eccentricities, in the way of wandering among the cottages without escort, and refusing invitations, had been stamped with the approval of the Rector, and no longer threatened to draw down disgrace upon them. She was free to engage in any good work that took her fancy, and she disturbed the orderly routine of the house by taking her meals at any moment that she could spare time for them.

In a way, her aunts had made a heroine of her. After their first burst of jealous indignation at the news of her engagement, they began to console themselves by thinking of the worse things that might have happened. If the Canon had not chosen one of them, he had not chosen one of the other ladies in the parish whose rivalry they had feared. If he had not made one of them Mrs. Presyllett, he was about to raise their social standing in the village by making them his aunts-in-law. It gave them a sense of superiority to the other ladies in the parish, and they began to feel grateful to Angela for the fact. Her new importance made them each more anxious to gain the greater share of her love and favour, and they vied with each other in spoiling her. After agreeing cordially with each other that she was a designing young minx, they had each in turn gone privately to congratulate her very sympathetically. Iphigenia had spoken feelingly of her own dead lover, and made Angela feel like a hypocrite by talking of the pleasure of being loved.

"I am afraid that you will find Prudence rather bitter about your engagement," she had said confidentially. "I



believe that she has had some foolish dream about the dear Canon herself, but of course he has never given her the slightest grounds for it, and I think that she ought to be content with one romance in her life as I am, don't you?"

Prudence had not shown any bitterness, however, but had talked about the lover who died before he proposed, and suggested dreams of a grand marriage and a beautiful wedding dress.

"The wedding will be a very quiet one," said Angela, in the cold suppressed tone which always had the effect of keeping her aunts at a distance, "and I shall be married in one of the dresses I have."

"But, my dear child, on this occasion surely!" began Prudence, taken aback. "People will think it so queer."

Her real distress touched the girl's better nature, which lay warm and healthy enough under her marble crust of piety, and she surprised the little lady by kissing her.

"You must please let me have a quiet wedding, Aunt Prudence. I am sure that Canon Presyllett would wish it, even if I had different views about it myself."

The old maid's thoughts went off at a tangent.

"Do you never call your *fiancé* by his christian name, dear?"

"I do not know what it is," said Angela, the marble crust closing again. It was a pain to her to hear everybody speaking of her spiritual partnership as if it were a common worldly marriage. She took it as a cross borne for the sake of the higher life which lay before her, and closed heart and conscience up in her holiness as a snail closes itself in its shell at the first rough touch.

Prudence found her cold and unresponsive, and fluttered away to lament with Iphigenia over the girl's unnaturalness.

Left alone, Angela put on her nun-like cloak and bonnet to go out and visit the sick.

The Canon's unquestioning faith in her holiness had stirred her to greater efforts, in the fear that she fell short of what he was imagining her. She had found the village too small a field for her efforts, and had extended them to Barnwood, finding satisfaction in the physical

fatigue she experienced from the long walk in addition to her visiting.

It was in Barnwood that she met Gabriel Lyne for the second time.

In the very lowest slum of the town, she was walking up the rickety staircase of an evil-smelling tenement house, when she found his tall handsome figure blocking her way as he came down. He had stretched out his hand to bar her progress.

"You must not come up here," he said commandingly. "There are two bad cases of scarlet fever on the first floor."

"That is why I have come," she said in her calm voice. "I want to see if I can give any help."

"But the fever, I am told, is of a specially infectious type. I have just been talking to the medical officer who is there now. You would run a great deal of risk for nothing."

"It would not be for nothing if I could give any help."

"The doctor is seeing to that. They are going to be moved in an hour or two to the fever hospital. They will get everything they require there."

"In the way of material things; but they might like to let me talk with them. One young man is just convalescent, and there are those who have not caught the fever, but may be taken ill and die at any moment."

"As you may be if you venture there."

"Please let me pass," she said, with a fearless smile; for he still barred the way with his arm.

"The risk is too great. You ought not to be standing here even."

"I do not consider the risk when my duty calls me anywhere."

"But duty is just what I am talking about," he said impetuously. "I see you want to do the right thing, but it would be wrong to go up there. Come out into the street, away from this pestilential hole. You ought never to have come here. We will talk about it outside."

His manner was so commanding that she obeyed almost instinctively. The denial of her duty to place herself in danger had taken away the sense of superior goodness which

had given her moral strength to resist him. It was a new sensation to her to be treated like a naughty child. And that sounded to her the tone in which the stranger addressed her when they were out in the sunshine again.

The interest that he took in her personality had made him really angry with her for risking it on an errand that seemed to him so useless and unnecessary.

"It is very wrong of you to come here just on the chance of influencing people who are very likely better than yourself, and, at any rate, have had a great deal more experience than a young girl like you can have had. Putting aside the chance that you will catch the fever yourself and give your friends a tremendous lot of trouble and anxiety over you, why, you may carry the infection with you anywhere. Your friends deserve some consideration, even if they are not poor."

She flushed at the condemnation in his voice—condemnation which cut all the deeper because she had been imagining herself so high above the possibility of human reproach.

"Before I see my friends I shall have had a long country walk—to Windlehurst," she said, trying to justify herself to this stranger whose very name she did not know.

"That is nothing," he said, hotly still. "You can carry infection in your clothes for hundreds of miles; and then there are the people you will pass in the street here."

"I thought that the air would carry away all chance of infection," she said, trying still to excuse herself.

"You ought to have made sure, have studied the question, before you made yourself so busy in other people's affairs."

His anger was all against the creed which had made her foolish ignoring of natural results a virtue, but she took it all to herself, and the tears came into her eyes.

His sternness disappeared at the sight, and a smile brought brightness and tenderness into his face.

"I know that you were trying to do right," he said soothingly, "and it was very brave of you. But before sacrificing yourself you ought always to consider whether you have a right to sacrifice other people as well. As it happens, there is no need for you to sacrifice anybody at all. The people

who are ill are being moved to the hospital, as I said, where they will have every attention."

"I was thinking more of their spiritual welfare," she said, "although I hoped to relieve some of their temporal needs at the same time."

"Their clergyman has visited them here, and there is a chaplain at the hospital. Are you afraid that they are neglecting their duties?"

"No, but——"

"Well! promise me that you will not run into such danger again. You ought to have a long life of usefulness before you. You must not shorten it by mistaking foolhardiness for duty."

"But you have been running a risk too," she said, smiling up suddenly through glistening eyes as the thought occurred to her.

The young man gave a short laugh.

"I did not know about the fever till I was in the place. The foolish people have been hiding it, through fear of the hospital or something. I called to look over the wretched place, to see if I cannot get an order for its condemnation. These houses are a disgrace to the town. The owners will let them hang together as long as they can get a good interest on their money by wringing rent from the poor creatures who die in them. I shall try and move the authorities to prosecute the owner of the place we have just been in. He ought to have pulled it down long ago."

"But will not prosecution only harden his heart? Would it not be better to speak to him, and show him the wrong that he is doing?"

Gabriel's lip curled a little.

"I do not think that it would be safe to credit him with a heart, and my speaking would do no good to a man who can remain deaf when the state of the house and the wretchedness of its inmates have cried out so long and so loudly. Life is too short for us to waste any of it attempting impossibilities. All we can hope to do is to make an example of him and frighten the other grasping rookery-owners."

"Who is the man of whom you are speaking?" she asked; and Gabriel shook his head.

"I have no idea, but it will be easy enough to find out."

They had reached the end of the miserable street, and he accosted a man in rags lounging outside the public-house at the corner.

"Can you tell me who owns the big house at the end there?" he said, pointing; and the man moved the stump of a clay pipe from his lips.

"The tall 'un at the end? Yes; I ought to, seein' I've lived there these two years."

Instinctively Gabriel moved to stand between the man and his companion. He was thinking of the infection.

"Who is the owner?" he asked, as the man put back his pipe.

"A parson. It looks like a parson's place, don't it? They are always the worst for repairs and the 'ardest for rent. He is a fine and holy fellow this 'un—fine at convertin'. I on'y wish he'd convert 'isself, and mend the place up a bit. We'd think it more than all 'is preachin' an' prayin' if 'e'd knock sixpence a week off the rent, or put a few slates on the roof where the rain comes in."

He was running on with his grievances, when Angela spoke.

"What is his name?"

"Presyllett, miss. 'E's the parson at Windlehurst."

Angela's face flushed.

"I think that you must be making a mistake," she said impulsively. "I know Canon Presyllett."

"Can't 'elp that, miss," said the man; "Canon Presyllett's the owner, an' your knowin' 'im doesn't make him any less of a blamed money-sucker. Why, on'y last week there was a poor woman on the top floor on'y two weeks be'ind with 'er rent. Three years she'd paid it regular, and on'y missed through the fever bein' in the 'ouse. Charwoman she was, an' the people wouldn't let 'er come an' work. 'Can't pay,' says the parson's agent, 'out you go, mum, and can starve in the street for anything I care.'"

He was warming up to his theme, when Gabriel, noticing

the white look on his companion's face, handed the man a shilling and walked on, offering the girl his arm.

"I suppose the Canon leaves the place too much in the hands of his agent," he said consolingly. "You are his sister, are you not?"

"Oh no," she said quickly, surprised by his mistake; "I am going to be his wife."

Gabriel started, and his face took the paler cast that hers had done at the revelations she had just heard, but he restrained the startled incredulous exclamation which forced itself almost to his lips.

"Under those circumstances," he said, after a long pause, "I will leave the matter of pulling down the house to you. Possibly the Canon has been too much engaged in his work to notice the state that the place is in. If you can persuade him to knock it down and build a serviceable workmen's dwelling, you will do more good than by sacrificing yourself to its fevers. Good-bye."

They had emerged into one of the chief thoroughfares of the town, and he held out his hand.

She gave it an honest clasp.

"Thank you; good-bye."

When he had left her, she felt sorry that she had forgotten to ask his name.

## CHAPTER IX

ANGELA walked along the street quickly, her mind full of thought. There were many people about, and she walked in the road, for fear of spreading infection from the house she had visited. When she came to a chemist's shop empty of customers, she hurried in and inquired for a strong disinfectant. The man gave her a powder, which she sprinkled over her dress plentifully, and she went out into the street again, smelling like a drug-store. There was no longer need for her to walk in the road; the people she met, glancing at her dress, which was so much like that of a hospital nurse, and smelling the disinfectant, took care to keep yards away from her.

She scarcely noticed their avoidance of her; her mind was full of a new and absorbing sensation, a feeling of humiliation which she had not experienced since she was a little girl and had been punished for some childish naughtiness.

Every day of her life she had humiliated herself before God, admitting that she had fallen short of the ideal He placed before her; but to have been tried by the ordinary ideal of the people around her, and found wanting in consideration and thought for others, was much more terrible.

Her humiliation before God had ministered in a way to her unconscious natural conceit; for in confessing her sins to her God, she had been vaguely satisfied by the consciousness that only a very sensitive soul would consider them sins at all, and that her self-humiliation was in itself a sign of her spiritual superiority to those around her.

But there was no such consideration to support her against the stranger's indictment. From a purely worldly standpoint she had been tried and found guilty of a selfish forget-

fulness of the safety of others. It was true that her sin had arisen from her spiritual zeal, but the man's scolding had made her zeal appear in a new light to her, and she could not plead it as a justification.

It was a sign of the true sterling worth of the character which underlay the girl's Pharisaic piety that she made no attempt to defend herself to her conscience. It never occurred to her to suggest to herself that the man who had spoken to her might have a different standard from herself for deciding right and wrong.

She had not realised yet that such a thing was possible. When her friends remonstrated with her on wearing an unpleasing dress and devoting all her time to the poor, she never doubted for a moment that deep in their hearts they realised that what she was doing was right, but that their own self-pleasing ideas had persuaded them that it was unnecessary to do right. That there could be any essential point of difference in different minds as to what was absolutely right, was an unknown thought to her. She had not reached that stage in piety when it is possible to think, as in the Canon's case, that an action can be wrong according to the highest standard of the worldly, and still right in the eyes of God. The world's standard by which it insisted on truth, fairness, and a certain amount of consideration for others, was for her true, but insufficient. She fondly imagined that she never offended against it, and looked for a higher ideal of conduct than it gave her. But she did not understand that higher ideal making her indifferent to the lower, and now that in her zeal she had offended against the world's standard, she was overcome with humiliation.

If she had succeeded in justifying herself, she would have felt angry with the man who had dared to find fault with her. But in her humiliation she felt a deep gratitude to him, and looked up to him as one wiser and better than herself.

What a noble face he had—how full of refinement and thought. She hoped that she would meet him again, and receive help from his straightforward criticism of her faults. In her new life she would meet many such men, no doubt,



drawn to the Rectory by a sympathy of aim with the Canon; and the thought threw a pleasing light over the prospect of her anticipated spiritual marriage.

It took her mind back to the revelation she had received about the man who was soon to be known as her husband, and she grieved over the thoughtlessness which had made him leave the house he owned to agents whose cruelty blackened his name. Her opinion of the Canon's goodness was far too deeply rooted for her to imagine for a moment that he was really aware of his responsibilities. She had received Gabriel Lyne's excuse for him as a perfect explanation of the anomaly which had startled her so much at the first hearing, and she did not doubt for a moment that Canon Presyllett needed only to be told of the evil he was doing to amend it. She shared that common weakness of undeveloped minds, a tendency to ascribe to everybody the virtues they claim rather than the virtues which their actions show them to possess.

The thought that the holy Rector had committed a grave fault through thoughtlessness brought him a little nearer to her own level, and helped her to recover from the blow which her own pride had received. She had recovered her old serenity by the time that she had reached the Rectory gate, and her eyes brightened when she caught sight of the Canon's gaunt figure leaving it.

He had not noticed her, and she hurried after him as he turned towards the village, the smile dying out of her eyes as her mind involuntarily compared his figure with that of the man who had spoken to her in the fever-stricken house.

For a moment, when he had caught the sound of her hurrying steps and turned blinking with the sun in his eyes, a feeling of repulsion seized her. His haggard face looked grey and spiritless in the strong light, and she was comparing it still with that of the stranger.

But she put away the feeling resolutely. It was the revolt of her worldly nature surely against the grey colouring and want of beauty which, according to her creed, God loved. It seemed to her on a par with the revolt she sometimes felt

against the plainness of her dress, of her life, and she put it away as a sin.

It was easier when he spoke, for the voice brought back the godlike pulpit figure.

"I am glad to see you, my child," he said gently, and his eyes brightened. Perhaps the sense of satisfaction to which his smile was due was not altogether spiritual. With face flushed by the haste she had used, as well as the thought of the good she was about to do for the poor inmates of the Canon's rookery, she looked very sweet and beautiful as she took his outstretched hand.

Angela only knew that his face had become more spiritual, and she began impulsively to talk about the house.

Her natural warm enthusiastic nature broke through the cold calmness which she was always studying to preserve, and she spoke with animation about the wretchedness of the poor inmates—an animation which made her look more beautiful, though less Madonna-like, than she had ever done before in his eyes.

The thought of the tie which was soon to connect them thrilled him as he glanced at her sparkling face, and the fear lest anything should come between them to prevent it was the chief thought in his mind as he answered her, jumping at the excuse she volunteered for his evil-repute among the inmates.

The house had been bequeathed to him, he said, by an old lady in his congregation, and he had left it entirely in the hands of a business man, and had never even visited the place. His excuse sounded very plausible to her, unaccustomed as she was to business matters, and she felt proud of his humility as he went on to thank her for showing him the evil that had arisen from his inexcusable neglect. He was so wrapped up in his spiritual work in the parish that even a glaring neglect of duty like this, which brought his spiritual work into disrepute, sometimes escaped his notice. It showed how necessary she would be to him in his work.

His deep earnest voice had become low and persuasive as he held up to her eager eyes new hopes of usefulness and

devotion; and certain fears of what she was doing, which troubled her when she was alone, disappeared in the glory-haze of the devoted life he painted for her as his spiritual partner.

One question of conscience had troubled her too much to be forgotten, however. Already she had received the first of her wedding presents, and the gift had come as a cold shock to her, making her feel like a hypocrite.

She asked him whether she ought to receive them, and her doubts disappeared again before his fluent casuistry.

They were only offerings of affection. Her marriage was simply an opportunity, not a reason for their presentation. The congratulations with which they were accompanied were only purified by being taken as congratulation on the life of greater devotion on which she was entering.

"I know that you would not do or let me do anything that is dishonest or wrong," she said, clasping her hands together nervously, "but I cannot help feeling sometimes as if we were deceiving people and acting a lie. I—" (she hesitated, and her face flushed)—"I have been reading the marriage service in the Prayer-Book. I never read or heard it before."

His face fell at the news. For a moment he felt inclined to tell her that she had done wrong, that she had committed an offence against perfect purity; but her faith in him depended so greatly on her faith in the Church of which he was a minister, that he put the inclination aside, and set himself to meet her scruples.

He had long ceased to question whether her scruples were right or wrong. God's leading had shown him that the projected pseudo-marriage was in accordance with His will, and every step necessary to bring it about became justifiable in consequence. He never troubled to think whether the arguments he used were true or false, whether he was giving her a real answer to her doubts or only a skilful pretence of one. His one duty was to see that she did not draw back and prevent him taking the step which was required of him.

A man always argues best when he does not stop to

consider the truth of his arguments, but thinks only of their effectiveness; and the Canon's manner of perfect assurance satisfied her even more than his words. If he had hesitated or considered, Angela might have felt doubts—doubts lest he might be mistaking their duty, as she had mistaken hers in visiting the fever-stricken house; but he spoke as if he were inspired, and she listened to him as to the mouthpiece of God.

“And what is there in the Prayer-Book service which makes you feel as though we shall deceive people by using it in God's service as a pledge against the flesh?” he asked, the very intonation of his voice making her a child asking instruction, and not a woman with a right to criticise conduct which affected herself.

She had some difficulty in answering.

“It makes us seem as though we are taking quite a different step from what we are really doing,” she said awkwardly at last. “I thought that you would let me tell my friends what our marriage really is, but you say that to do so would spoil its usefulness, that they might still look upon us as actually unmarried.”

“Certainly. It is necessary for our pledge that the world should think us bound together by the common earthly tie. All that concerns others is the social result—that we live under one roof, that you take my name, that we pledge ourselves against any other union. The rest is a matter which does not concern them—a matter between our souls and God.”

She was still unsatisfied, as her face and the nervous action of her hands showed, and she walked along the sunlit road silently, trying to find words in which to explain the point that troubled her.

“There seems so much in the service that will sound like a mockery—a deception,” she said at last with evident effort. “Our reason is so different from——”

“From those given in the Prayer-Book,” he said, finishing the sentence as she halted nervously. “There you are wrong, my child. Our reasons are only a higher and more spiritual form of the reasons that the Prayer-Book gives. Marriage,

according to the service, is a symbol signifying to us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and the Church. Which do you think is the truest symbol—our spiritual union for good works, or the mere fleshly union of the world? Our partnership is surely the truest, and therefore the most real, marriage. That the world will not understand it, is only a result of its own spiritual blindness. For our partnership the Church has invented no form. We are bound therefore to accept the earthly form which symbolises it. It is necessary only, in reading the words of the Prayer-Book, to give to everything its true spiritual significance. Let us look at the passage which has disturbed you—the causes for which matrimony was ordained. Firstly, it says it is ordained for the procreation of children. Our children will be what St. Paul speaks of as the fruit of the spirit, an added devotion to the work of our Lord, and new labours for Him. Then the second reason for matrimony—as a remedy against sin. Do you not see that the ceremony will mean more to us than to the world, when we enter into it as a pledge not of comparative but of perfect purity? You must try and see these things in their true light, Angela. I know, my dear child, that the thoughtless misconceptions of the world around you must necessarily trouble and harass a soul as pure and unworldly as your own. You must look upon it as a sacrifice made to God in order to achieve His work more perfectly. For the world's blindness you are not responsible. God Himself knows what is in your heart, my child."

Accustomed as she had been from her youth to accept with complete confidence the utterances of the official exponents of her creed, Angela went away from the interview perfectly satisfied after this pastoral lesson in deception; and she bore with a calm serenity, and sense of superior holiness, the playful hints of the matronly sewing-woman who was hard at work at Lilac Lodge increasing the bride-elect's stock of under-linen, and whose human interest in marriage and maternity exceeded her good taste or piety.

## CHAPTER X

GABRIEL LYNE had a profound pity for pious people. Seeing as he did in every fleeting cloud, in every fading flower and decaying leaf, a message from nature that individuality ends with death, there was something painfully pathetic to him in the spectacle of a man sacrificing for the hope of an after-death reward a single ray of sunshine in the one world of which he has any assurance. It was this keen pity which put venom into his pen when he attacked the bases of the conventional creeds, which seemed to him so irreligious and illogical.

Religion, as he understood it, was the establishment of a relationship between human action and the Creative Spirit or Mind, for which we all unconsciously formulate some character every time that we perform a reasoning action.

"Every time that we put a kettle on the fire," he had written in one of his books, "we assume the existence of a memory and a consistency which is neither in the water nor in the fire. Water cannot remember that it boils at a hundred and twelve degrees Fahrenheit, and fire can have no personal predilection of its own which inclines it to affect the water in my kettle exactly as it treats water everywhere else."

The difference between his creed and Presyllett's lay in the fact that the Canon called this Mind "Nature," and made elaborate excuses for her character not being so good as it ought to be seeing that the superior God had invented her, while Gabriel took it as his conception of Deity, and called it the Creative Mind. To his mind, the assumption of any method for determining human conduct which was incon-

sistent with his method of obtaining knowledge about the action of heat and water was to assume the existence of two distinct Creative Minds, and a confession of polytheism.

"Science is monotheism, and monotheism is religion. What people call religion is polytheism, and polytheism is pagan," he was fond of saying; and his honest opinion that conventional Christianity is based upon a disguised denial of the Deity's oneness made the hostility with which he opposed it the outcome of a religious zeal. To think it false, and to see his fellow-men sacrificing their happiness in obedience to its laws, filled his mind with a supreme pity.

The pity had never been so keen in his heart as when he met Angela in the Rectory garden, with her nun-like costume and piously downcast eyes.

Every emotion in us lies always waiting for contrast. We can feel nothing but differences. Consciously or unconsciously to us, it is a contrast always which makes us laugh, which makes us cry—which makes us happy, which makes us sad—which makes us pity, which makes us love. And it was the striking difference between the girl's repressed solemnity and the bright natural joyousness which ought to have come from her youth and beauty and goodness that touched his pity to its depths, and kept the face he had seen only for a few moments vivid in his mind for days. He felt that her creed had offered him a personal injury in suppressing the smile which had come for a moment into her eyes as he returned her handkerchief, making him wish to see it always there. It robbed him of the pleasure that he knew it would be to him to see the lovely face beautiful with laughter, to see her graceful figure done justice to by a dress which suited her. It robbed him of the pleasure which her honest eyes and thoughtful face told him that he would enjoy by exchanging real thoughts with her—thoughts which came as unaffectedly from her heart as his own did, with no consideration of the conventional religious mould in which she was schooling herself to think them as a matter of duty.

As their eyes met he had felt a subtle sense of sympathy with the soul behind hers, which almost persuaded him that for

the sake of full confidence in her naked thoughts, and for full enjoyment of her personal beauty, he could be content without effort to renounce all idea of seeing any other woman's mind or body fully unveiled.

To realise this completely is love, and it had almost come to him in the meeting of their eyes.

His half-born emotion was not a selfish one. Interwoven with it, with preponderating fibre, was the thought which makes love perfect and divine—the thought that, by offering himself to her, he could give her all she needed to make her life full and complete. He thirsted to lend her his eyes, that she might see the Creative Mind as he saw it, and not as an austere person who prefers grey to Liberty shades, and grave faces to laughter and smiles.

It is the absence of this hope of helpfulness interwoven with the hope of personal satisfaction which makes human love too often such a paltry thing, almost worthy of the light in which the ascetic regards it. But it was the hope of helpfulness which appealed most to Gabriel Lyne at that first meeting, and enabled him to go away thinking his feeling all pity when it was more than half love.

In spite of the eagerness he felt to see her again, he made no attempt to do so. The thought that she was a relative of Canon Presyllett's made the chance very remote of his ever meeting her without an insurmountable prejudice on her side; and the practical difficulties in the way of his establishing a friendship with his Nun made him give himself up to dreaming instead of action. Superstition is difficult to eradicate from our natures, however strenuously we fight against it; and the superstition to which we cling most fondly is that which, in some form or other, transforms hope into prophecy. Rationalist as he was, Gabriel allowed himself to feel that he was fated to meet his Nun again and know her intimately, when the least self-analysis would have shown him that the feeling had no basis except in his desire. He would have blushed to find himself in the same lotus-land as the conventional Christian, who claims a heaven and hell simply because he desires them so earnestly for himself and his enemies.



It is always the effect of superstition to drive us into an unhealthy activity or a dreamy torpor, and Gabriel was roused suddenly from his pleasant security to curse the fallacy which had kept him happily inactive while the chance lasted of his ever affecting Angela's mind.

The dream vanished at her announcement of the marriage which was to take place between herself and the Rector of Windlehurst—a marriage which promised to render permanent every wrong and unhealthy idea that her creed contained.

The meeting in the slum had served to strengthen the spell which her beauty exercised over him, and his hope of being able to influence her and set her free from the trammels of asceticism had been raised by the child-like faith with which she accepted his enunciation of duty. Then, as the future became illuminated by anticipations of further meetings and exchange of ideas, the blow fell.

Pity was still the chief emotion of which he was conscious—pity and a fierce anger against the creed which could make her in perfect faith hand over her young beautiful life with all its wonderful possibilities to a man she did not love. It was impossible for him to imagine her loving the Canon, with his gaunt figure, his cadaverous face, and pious lack of humanity. He could see the girl's motives almost as clearly as if she had proclaimed them to him. The respect which she had been trained from her youth to feel for the clergy—a respect which would make the Canon's offer of marriage a dazzling honour. The opportunities of good work which she would look forward to enjoying as his wife. He could follow out all her motives without the need of supposing a spark of passion or real affection for the man himself. And her sacrifice of herself, as he called it to himself, became very terrible when he realised in it only a sacrifice to ideas which to him were false and pernicious.

When he tried to imagine the Canon's motives, he became less just and true in his estimate.

In a man who had shown himself incapable of realising what love was by describing it always as unclean, he could see no motive for this marriage to a beautiful woman so

much younger than himself than a filthy passion or a greed for money. Possibly his Nun would bring her husband a fortune, he thought.

As a matter of fact, Angela became mistress on her marriage of a considerable income left her by her father; but Gabriel Lyne misjudged the Canon in thinking that the fact affected him to any significant extent.

The only way in which the money influenced the marriage was through Angela, who would have looked at her partnership with the clergyman differently if there had been any question of her becoming pecuniarily dependent upon him.

The thought of any woman being delivered by her own false ideas of duty as a sacrifice to passion and greed would have been painful to Gabriel Lyne, with his tender sympathy for every weak and helpless thing.

When the victim was his beautiful Nun, the thought was almost insupportable. The pity of it, the terrible pity of it, when her beautiful honest eyes, too, made him think that she would have seen so easily a greater truth than she held, if it had been shown to her.

As he watched her figure, graceful in spite of her dress, disappearing along the roadway of the crowded street, he felt an impulse to hasten after her, to argue with her, to show her that the ideas at the basis of her sacrifice were all wrong ones.

But he restrained the impulse. He was a young man, but he had already learned how limited is the power of argument, how useless all argument is which does not reveal to one's hearer for the first time the deep-seated springs of his own action.

To do this it is necessary to know one's hearer, and analyse his motives better than he does himself; and he knew very little about the girl he wished to influence—little indeed beyond what her face and her dress had told him in their first meeting.

And then, if he could influence her, what right had he? It was not as if she were considering the question of becoming engaged to Presyllett. Perhaps if he had roused himself

from his superstitious sense of security a little earlier, he might have been in time to influence her; but now she was engaged, and it was too late.

He never claimed for himself any right that he would not concede to others, and, looked at as a general principle, the idea did not appeal to him of anybody trying to part an affianced couple simply because the match appeared to the onlooker as unsuitable and promising unhappiness to either party. Nor did the fact that he had begun to take a personal interest in his Nun justify in his case an action which he would think dishonourable in another.

He turned away with clenched hands and a white face from watching her disappearing figure. A possibility of happiness which had brightened the last week or two of his life more than he had imagined till now, was gone utterly, irretrievably, and all that he could do was to close his mind to the thought of the girl who had interested him so deeply and turn his attention from an alluring impossibility to the things that could be done.

Other men and women were suffering through adherence to false ideas of duty—why should he give all his thoughts to this one? After all, what did he know of her? He had not exchanged a hundred words with her in his life.

It was an article of his religion that dreaming was wrong, that an emotion was to be avoided unless it could be made an incentive to practical action; and what practical action could he honourably take to save this beautiful but really unknown girl from the fate which she had chosen for herself, but against which his whole nature revolted?

“She must marry him,” he said to himself as he turned away, “but oh! the cruel, horrible pity of it!”

His face contracted as with physical pain.

The agent who collected the rents in Canon Presyllett's rotting tenement-house found him a very ill-tempered person when the young man made his way to his office.

He had called to make inquiries about the poor char-woman who was to be turned out, and after denouncing with a savageness that was quite new to him the crime of driving a tenant from the fever-stricken house to another

part of the town, where she would probably carry the infection with her, and the bad policy of losing a tenant when the fever lessened the chances of another being found, he obtained a promise from the man that the poor woman should be allowed to remain by paying part of her debt. The whole amount was a trifling one unworthy of the rationalist's consideration, but he had conscientious scruples against giving a penny more than was necessary to the rack-renters.

On his way home to Windlehurst after the transaction was completed, he was overtaken by Gateacre driving alone in his dogcart from town.

The bluff Squire pulled up and invited him to jump in.

"I have been wanting to see you, Lyne," he said in his hearty voice. "You have been keeping out of the way lately. Hard at work at the book, I suppose. I was really thinking of calling in at the cottage, but did not want to bother you. There is a little thing troubling me that I should like your opinion on. I do not know how it is, but I always seem wanting your advice. You look at things in such a sound, common-sense light. Jump up."

Gabriel was holding the horse. It was a spirited one, and Gateacre always forgot his driving when he began to talk.

"I think that I had better not get up, thanks," he said, smiling. "I accidentally got into a house in Barnwood reeking with fever, and must change my clothes before I sit down with anybody."

"Stuff, man," said the Squire. "Get up."

Gabriel smiled, but stood where he was.

"What was it you wanted to talk about—the reading-room again?"

"No; I am giving that a rest for a month or two. You and Presyllett have muddled me up completely between you. You tell me what is fair. Presyllett wants me to aim at something higher than fairness."

Gabriel's lip curled. The very mention of the Rector's name had made him feel a physical nausea, and he answered bluntly—

"Your only duty, according to the parson, is to agree with him."

Gateacre flushed a little. He liked Lyne, but he did not like his contempt of conventional Christianity and its ministers.

"Presyllett is a better man than I am," he said, "and looks at things in a loftier light."

"Then why don't you take his advice altogether?" asked Gabriel irritably.

"I can't in this case, because it is about the Rector himself, and I should not if I could. Christianity is a great thing, my boy, as you will see for yourself when you are a little older. We cannot get on without it. We are not all naturally moral like you. But we want common-sense as well, and I mean no harm to Presyllett when I say that you have more than he has."

"Christianity is necessary to make you do your duty, but you want something else to tell you what your duty is, eh?" said Gabriel with his unusually bitter laugh.

"Perhaps so," said the Squire, who always got huffy and uncomfortable when Lyne remotely criticised his creed, "but that does not make Christianity any the less necessary."

"With your Rector it is the other way on," proceeded Gabriel contemptuously. "His Christianity tells him what his duty is, and his common-sense prevents him doing it. I hear that he is throwing up his ascetic ideas about marriage."

The Squire's eye brightened.

"Oh! you have heard about it. It is just what I was going to talk about."

"The bride-elect has just been telling me," said Gabriel; "but I don't see how it concerns us. Nobody asked him to be a celibate. We can't prevent him thinking marriage a sin, or getting married in spite of it."

"I don't know about that, my boy. Nobody asked him to be a celibate, as you say, but I asked him to get married, and, by Jove, I believe that is why he is doing it."

"You asked him to marry that poor girl?" Gabriel stared

at him incredulously, his interest fully aroused, in spite of his determination not to argue about Canon Presyllett.

The Squire dropped his eyes under the incredulous scorn in his friend's. He hastened to excuse himself.

"No, I simply advised him to marry—said a married clergyman was of more use in the parish; but I never thought of him choosing anybody but a woman of his own age. It is the thought of the girl which makes me hate to think that I had anything to do with it. It hardly seems fair to her, does it? For it is as plain as a pikestaff to me that Presyllett has no personal feeling in the affair, and is only taking a wife for the sake of his pastoral duties. An older woman would understand that, and would know what she was doing. But a mere girl! It hardly seems fair. You have seen her?"

"Yes, twice."

"A nice girl she seems, doesn't she? Only a little too prim and religious for her age. I suppose that is what makes her like the idea of marrying a clergyman, but it scarcely seems fair to let her tie herself. A girl like that ought to be married for love, as I say to my wife, and not for the good of the parish. I suppose she does not know what love is, and Presyllett is not the man to do much courting. Between you and me, Lyne, I believe the Rector intends to have the girl for a district visitor and all that sort of thing, and nothing else."

"What do you mean?" said Lyne.

"You know. Presyllett is a different sort of man from what we are. We don't see anything wrong in marriage, thank goodness; but the Rector wants to be holier than an ordinary man."

"He has changed his opinions apparently?"

"I don't know. He had not the day before he asked Miss Gaydon to marry him, and from the way he talks I can't help thinking, although it is a queer thing to say, that he has not now. And then the way he chose the girl—the first person he met after I was telling him that the parish thought he ought to have a wife. He'd never seen her in his life before except in church. Then

they never kiss when they meet. I've heard people talk about it, and I've seen it myself when they had no idea that I was in sight. And such a pretty young thing too. I haven't a shadow of doubt the Canon is no more in love with her than you are, and that he means to marry her and keep his holiness all the same—use her as a house-keeper and district visitor. There are not many men who could do it."

"Or who would wish to, thank goodness," said Gabriel, his mind recoiling from the idea as against something horrible.

The Squire was too impregnated with the Canon's creed to help seeing something of nobility and heroism in it. He did not say so, however. The expression on Gabriel's face prevented him.

"And looking at it from the lady's point of view, you don't think the marriage a fair or honest one?" asked the latter, his voice quiet enough.

"Oh! it is fair enough at present. The girl is as holy as Presyllett himself; thinks it wicked to take a cup of tea with my wife. All she thinks of is sacrificing herself for her soul's sake. What rubs me the wrong way, and makes me feel such a damnable sense of responsibility about her, is her youth. Girls of her age often have that pious fit on them, but it wears off; they fall in love and marry, like a woman should. But she'll find that she can't. I do not think Presyllett ought to have chosen a girl who has no idea what she is sacrificing, who does not know what love is."

"Well! have you told him so?"

"Yes, but he took a very high tone. It was a matter that he had already decided in prayer. When he talks like that, I can't say anything. There is not the least chance of my influencing Presyllett against the marriage."

"Then why trouble yourself if you have done all you can?"

"Because of the girl. I can't help thinking about her, and remembering that I am in a way responsible if she is miserable. I wondered whether we could make her think the matter over again."

"We?"

"Yes. To tell you the truth, I was looking forward to you helping me. I can't talk to the girl. She always makes me feel as if I were a sinner in church, and the wife does not like her. You come and talk to her to-morrow. She is taking lunch with us. The wife has a meeting of some sort in the morning, and another in the afternoon about parish work. She would not come for anything else; and she has agreed to stay lunch, to save time between the two. It would give you time for a nice quiet chat for an hour after lunch."

"And I am to persuade her to break off her engagement?"

The Squire reddened again at the tone.

"I do not care if you don't mention it."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

The Squire mopped his face nervously, and decided to put a bold face on the matter.

"Look here, Lyne. You have seen Miss Gaydon. Don't you like the look of her?"

"Yes."

"Then I wish to goodness you would try and make her like you. She is just the woman to make you an ideal wife. You'd knock the nonsense out of her head, and she would make a Christian of you. Nobody can deny that she is pretty; and she has money of her own, if that is any consideration to you. I said to my wife that you seemed made for each other, before this wretched marriage to Presyllett was dreamed of. Don't interrupt me till I have done. I know that the time is short. She is to marry Presyllett in a fortnight or so; but if you could not make her promise to marry you in that time, you could let her see a little of what love is, and what a real flesh-and-blood man is like, and make her hesitate about sacrificing herself to the Canon. I know it is a queer thing to suggest to anybody, but you are not tied down by any conventional nonsense; you look at the reality of things, and you must see that the girl would have a thousand times more chance of happiness with you than with a saint. Not that I would say anything against Presyllett. But when a girl marries



she wants a husband, not a marble block of piety. What do you say? The idea is chivalrous enough to appeal to you, isn't it?"

He paused, breathless with the haste he had used to get in the whole proposition, which appeared to him a brilliant one, without interruption.

Gabriel tried to smile, but his face was white and drawn.

"There is only one thing to say to your plan, Squire," he answered; "Miss Gaydon is already engaged."

## CHAPTER XI

"I NEVER knew Lyne in a bad temper before. I suppose he is working too hard," said the Squire to himself, as he drove away, leaving Gabriel to walk slowly homeward alone. "I shall give up bothering with other people's affairs. I have put everything wrong, and now I have made Lyne think badly of me by trying to put it right again. I wish he could take a little more interest in the girl, but I suppose he can think of nothing but his book."

Poor Gabriel was not thinking of his book, although he tried hard. He was finding that argument is as useless directed against oneself as against others. He had told himself quite clearly that his commiseration for the ascetic's bride was a perfectly useless feeling; that he must take from it a warning against superstitious ease, and an added incentive in his struggle against the conventional creeds; and having thus directed his emotion into the only channel in which it could be of the slightest use to anybody, cease to feel it. Then, when he had realised his duty clearly, he had discovered that the emotion had ceased to be a purely mental one in which it was possible to cope with it; that it had conquered all his senses like an illness, given him a physical nausea, clouded his eyes and taken the beauty out of the sunshine, dulled his wits and thrown a black and unpleasing cast over every thought that had ever interested him. There was no pleasure in walking, although he had always felt it a keen one; his book did not seem worth thinking about, although it had been absorbing all his energies until his meeting with his Nun, and had not ceased to employ his mind after it.

"Nothing seems particularly worth doing," he said to

himself, and almost as he thought it, a light came into his listless eye, and his step, which had been languid and spiritless, quickened, for he thought he had caught sight of a grey cloak and Quaker-like bonnet farther along the road.

But it was only an illusion of desire. The cloak belonged to an old market-woman, and he could have laughed at the contrast which she presented to the figure he had momentarily conjured out of her outline, if he had not been too dispirited to smile at anything in heaven or earth.

His step lost its momentary vitality again, and he walked along the country road with a languor which was strangely in contrast with his usual quick stride. He only hastened his step as he passed the Rectory, for the sight of the place instinctively increased the sickness he felt.

“Have I caught the fever, and is this dulness and sickness the first symptom?” he asked himself; but it did not seem to him of very great importance whether he had or not. It would be a hardship to the old woman who kept house for him. She was nervous, and unused to nursing, and he decided mechanically that if he were ill he would have to send for a trained nurse. Personally the illness would not affect him. A few hours before he would have fought against the idea fiercely, as a bar to his work. He would have told himself that he could not, must not be ill until his book was in the hands of the publisher. But this afternoon his book had lost all importance in his eyes.

He tried to rouse his interest in it as a means of shaking off the feeling which oppressed him, but the feeling seemed too little connected with thought to be affected by a mental resolve. His philosophical method of sweeping away a trouble was as useless against it as against the depression of a bilious attack.

It was only when he thought of his literary work in connection with his Nun that it gave him the least interest. Would she ever read it, and would it ever influence her if she did?

A man like Presyllett would remain unaffected by it, he knew, because he would read it only to compare it with the beliefs he held himself, to decide its truth simply by the

degree with which it agreed with his own tenets. Gabriel knew what the attitude was, because he was always struggling against it himself when he read the works of his opponents.

But his Nun, with her honest, fearless eyes—surely the desire to know what was true was stronger in her heart still than the opposing desire to know that what she believed was true. The one is a religious passion based on faith in the God of truth, the other pure selfishness.

But if the girl ever saw his book, and read it with clear eyes, the religion in her not yet killed by her devotion to conventional Christianity, what good would it do? It would be too late to save her from this horrible marriage, and after the marriage enlightenment for her was fearful to think of.

His step quickened, and the cloud of gloom lifted a little from his spirits as he busied himself in the new problem which had suggested itself to his mind. He had been right in thinking that thought was the antidote to his wretchedness. He had not realised that it must be thought connected with Canon Presyllett's future wife.

He did not analyse the change in his mood. The thought engrossed him. Would it be better for his Nun to retain after her marriage the opinions and thoughts which had driven her into it, even if they were false ones?

With his keen sympathy and power of throwing himself into another person's position, he shuddered to think of the wife's awakening.

He was sure that the only tie which bound her to Presyllett was his supposed holiness. What would her feeling be if she saw that holiness with Gabriel's eyes—as little more than a morbid egotism, which made self-approbation and the intoxication of emotional excess more enjoyable to him than the healthy delights of living?

The armour with which the mind protects itself from ideas which would wreck its peace, is forged only by the daily actions and thoughts of many years. It is not made by a single action, like that of her marriage to Presyllett. She had only nineteen years to look back upon, and her

mind was unformed, unhardened to its mould. Her marriage would make the new truth disastrous to her peace, but it would not prevent her receiving it. For her the merciful provision of nature was at fault.

As far as he could see, the Canon's wife, once married, would be utterly and hopelessly miserable if her faith in a false creed were shaken; but the keen pain that he felt in his sympathetic realisation of her misery seemed to him only a temptation of selfishness, the illusion of nearness which is for ever opposing real knowledge, just as the apparent flatness of the earth, when we take a limited view of it, is always making us forget its actual rotundity.

Was he not doubting his principle that it is always best to know truth simply because this one woman interested him so much more than any other, through that selfish tenderness for certain cases which is the one foe to right-doing? Suppose his Nun remained a Nun, and was happier herself for doing so, what unhappiness to others might she not cause; what other women's happiness might not be clouded by her teaching and example? It might lead to other enthusiastic girls sacrificing themselves to loveless marriages through a false idea that love is not holy.

He could not have struggled over the question more if Angela Gaydon had been waiting for his decision whether she was to remain a Calvinistic Christian or hold his own views after her marriage to the Canon.

As he neared his home, the old-fashioned cottage where he had settled down for literary quiet on the outskirts of the village, he roused himself with a sudden sense of great relief to the fact that the question was only an abstract one.

"Thank goodness," he said to himself, "there is no call for me to hasten her enlightenment."

In his tenderness for her, he congratulated himself on the slightness of the chance that she should ever read his book. There was nothing in Gabriel Lyne's religion to make him a busybody, and he felt devoutly thankful for the fact. But with the realisation that no thought or action of his was practically to affect the Canon's future wife, thought

became distasteful again, and his languid lack of interest in everything returned. Mechanically he changed his suspected clothes, and hung out in the sunny garden with his own hand every article that he had worn in the fever-stricken house.

Then mechanically he seated himself at his desk and began to write. With a grand effort of will-force he finished a sheet, and leaned back in his chair to read it. It was simply abuse of the ideas whose falseness he had been previously trying to show with a masterly delicacy, and he tore the sheet up.

—"Great Heavens! I am like one of themselves, simply denouncing what I don't think true, just as if it mattered to anybody what I like or dislike," and he threw the fragments into the paper-basket.

Then he took a fresh sheet and tried to think, but his pen began to sketch instead, and almost of its own volition put a beautiful Madonna-like face, under a Quaker-like little bonnet, on the paper.

Gabriel tore that up also and threw it into the paper-basket, and then, seeing half the face looking out of it, took it up again and burnt it.

After walking restlessly up and down the room for ten minutes trying in vain to resume the train of his argument, he put on his hat. He could not possibly work. He must take a walk into the village. The Squire had given him his Nun's name, Miss Gaydon. No doubt she was a relative of the two maiden ladies who lived at Lilac Lodge, and if he passed the house——

He pulled himself up, as he read his thoughts.

What possible use could it be to either of them for him to see her? What a weak fool he was becoming.

He took off his coat, and went out into the garden to dig.

## CHAPTER XII

GABRIEL LYNE was in the habit of digging when Canon Presyllett would have prayed, and up to the present had found it more efficacious, if we judge his conduct from a purely worldly standpoint of morality. But in the present case digging proved useless, and after spending a whole day and a half in hard work at his garden, the constant inclination to make some excuse to himself for strolling round the village in the direction of Lilac Lodge, of helping the poor in the place, or visiting the Hall, where he knew that his Nun was sometimes to be found, only became stronger than ever. Canon Presyllett would have prayed more fervently. Lyne went up to town for a fortnight, gave a lecture at South Place, saw his publisher, and wrote a couple of magazine stories. His character owed its strength to the fact that he admitted its weakness, and, instead of awaiting with false courage a downright struggle between right and wrong, ran away at the first temptation to a foolishness, and saved himself from moral effort by mechanical means. Possibly his method was due to an absence of all glorification in moral triumph. For the sake of his own true permanent welfare certain things were to be avoided, and he always took the easiest means of avoiding them, without the least thought of claiming credit to himself for doing so.

If Canon Presyllett had found his interest increasing in another man's sweetheart or wife, he would have let himself drift until his thoughts became actually sinful ones, and then have luxuriated in the holiness of resisting them—unless they had become too strong for him to do so. Lyne had no taste for the desperate moral struggles which ministered to the ascetic's love of emotional excess, and when he realised that

his interest in his Nun was greater than any he could take in a married woman, and that he had no honourable motive for preventing her approaching marriage, he did not dilly-dally with his emotion.

His only temptation to do so lay in the fact that the marriage had not taken place yet. His restlessness was due to the hundred hopes and arguments, which he knew were false ones, yet which insisted on filling his mind—the hope that something might happen to prevent the wedding, the arguments which suggested that in this particular case it was permissible for a man to come between a woman and her promised husband, and try to steal her away from him.

When the marriage had actually taken place he would feel no temptation. The inevitable may crush us, but it does not keep us in a ferment. He knew that it would not crush him even.

He had none of that reverence for emotion which would have prevented him measuring his passion for the girl who had attracted him, and admitting to himself that after their two meetings it could not be strong enough to affect his life or action very seriously; that with the knowledge of her marriage he could get it out of his mind.

It was not as though he would ever meet her again on a friendly footing. The Canon would blacken his character to her too much for that. There would be no opportunity of friendly converse between the Infidel of Windlehurst and the wife of its Rector. Gabriel, although he rebelled against the fact, was glad of it in his heart, for it saved him from the necessity of considering whether he was wise in returning to Windlehurst even after the marriage. He had learnt to like the place, and imagined that he did his best work in it, and he was genuinely fond of Gateacre. It was a relief to think that his reputation would preserve him from the danger of Mrs. Presyllett's friendship more effectually than two hundred miles of railway line.

After his fortnight's change of scene and occupation the young man went back to his book, master of himself, and with energy enough to make up for lost time and get his



volume ready in time for the impatient publisher. A passion roused by two glimpses of a woman's face must be fed well on imagination to thrive, and Gabriel resolutely starved his.

The first thing that he saw when he entered the village was a triumphal arch, which the congregation had insisted on erecting over the street as a sign of rejoicing for the Rector's wedding. The flowers which had made a brave show when the wedding carriage passed underneath, were withered now, and the paper trimmings looked very miserable after two nights of rain. But the wooden framework had cost too much to be pulled down yet, and was to be trimmed up again when the happy pair returned from their honeymoon.

Angela had objected to the honeymoon, as she had objected to the triumphal arch and to the white dress which her aunts with protestations and prayers had driven her to wear for the ceremony. Her objections had been overruled by the Canon, on the ground that it was necessary for their marriage to be in all respects an ordinary one in the eyes of the world. They were going through the ceremony for a special purpose, for the sake of their usefulness and spiritual freedom, and must go through it completely, or the world might refuse to recognise the pledge they had taken, might still expect either of them to fall in love like a worldly person if they admitted that there was no earthly love in their partnership. That was his excuse to her, on the honeymoon journey, for the fact that he had kissed her in the vestry immediately after the ceremony. As far as he understood or admitted to himself his motives, it was the true one.

The dress she had worn was a simple one of nun's-veiling, although Prudence had pleaded hard for silk, and Iphigenia for satin. Its simplicity suited her, and she had looked very sweet and beautiful in it, though almost too spirituelle for a bride, as certain envious old maids in the parish suggested, for want of anything worse to say.

They were talking about it at the Hall when Gabriel called there in the evening.

"Really I quite fell in love with her," said Mrs. Gateacre enthusiastically, "such a child she looked. It is a pity she is so unnaturally good. Did you notice, John, how she started when the bridegroom kissed her after the ceremony? She seemed quite shocked."

The Squire and Gabriel glanced at one another, but did not speak, and the matron ran on.

"Of course she is very young, and I have not the least doubt that she will turn into a very nice sensible woman in time. She only wants her 'unco-guidness,' as the Scotch call it, to wear off a little."

"Let us hope that it will not," said Gabriel gravely; and the good lady opened her eyes.

"It is funny to hear you say that, Mr. Lyne. I thought you wanted everybody to——"

She paused for an expression, and the Squire supplied it, with a twinkle in his eye—

"To be as bad as himself."

Mrs. Gateacre laughed.

"I do not think that is very bad," she said, with that kind lenience which the professed Christian of to-day would show to the Antichrist himself so long as he was gentlemanly and could be trusted with the daughter and the silver spoons of the house. "But I thought you were anxious for everybody to give up the observances of religion, Mr. Lyne?"

"I was thinking that in Mrs. Presyllett's case any change of creed would place her hopelessly at variance with her husband."

They had noticed that his face was a little paler and graver to-night than it had been when they saw it last, and it had grown even graver at the mention of the Canon's marriage, but he gave no other sign of a personal interest in it; and the ease with which he found that he could speak now of Mrs. Presyllett persuaded him that he had succeeded in making his sympathy for her a purely intellectual emotion, like the sympathy he felt for the heroines of his own stories, whose fate affected him without making him dream of desiring that they were alive to take part in his own actual life.

There is a calm region in the human mind devoted to the unattainable, and a man's morality depends upon the success with which he can lock in its emotionless and ambition-proof recesses the thought of other people's peculiar property. Gabriel Lyne had been accustomed to keep the thought of other men's wives there, and the force of association was sufficient to give his Nun admission directly the marriage with Presyllett was an accomplished fact. He spoke of her now as of a person in a story.

Mrs. Gateacre welcomed an argument with him.

"You think that complete agreement of opinions is necessary to married happiness, Mr. Lyne. I do not think that it matters very much except in novels. In my idea, everybody believes at heart very much the same thing, and the only difference is the way in which they word it to themselves. If a man and his wife begin to word it differently, the only result is that they don't talk so much. It is a pity, of course, but talk is after all only an interesting game, and anybody can do without it, just as a girl can do without tennis or dancing when she marries a lame man."

"But if we alter our ideas, it must change all our actions surely?" said Gabriel; and Mrs. Gateacre shook her head.

"I don't think it does, except in the case of an extraordinary person like yourself."

"But I am not extraordinary," said Gabriel, laughing. His interest in the game of words, as Mrs. Gateacre called it, had made him forget for a moment the subject, just as one may become too interested in a game of whist to remember the sixpenny stake for which one is supposed to be striving.

"Oh! but you are very extraordinary," protested the matron, with a smile in her eyes, "and I think that you form a wrong estimate of other people through imagining that they are all like yourself. You know the reason why you do everything, but ninety-nine people in a hundred have no idea of the motive which makes them perform a single action. They don't look for one, and have no more power of finding one if they did than the tree has of finding out why it grows. You act, or think you act, in obedience to your thoughts; everybody else acts by instinct, and they

can think whatever they like without altering their actions one iota. As a matter of fact, if you will forgive my saying so, and allow me to contradict myself, I think you are like other people, and that your opinions do not direct you half as much as you think they do. As far as I can understand your opinions—and I confess that I can't make head or tail of the book you lent John—it seems to me that you ought to think of nothing but pleasing yourself, and claim to have no motive for doing a single good or self-sacrificing action. If I thought your opinions had anything to do with your actions, I should be frightened of seeing you in the house; but I know that your instincts rule you like those of everybody else, and that your instincts are those of a good man——”

“And a thoroughly nice sensible fellow,” broke in the Squire, as his wife paused with that involuntary delicacy which prevents us praising a person to his face. Gateacre had been gazing with admiration at his wife's animated face. He lacked in some way the stimulus which made her talk, as she talked naturally to Lyne. He did not agree with the gist of her argument any more than Gabriel did. The dependence upon instinct would have stultified the deep thoughts by which he was for ever trying to decide what his duty was in the parish, but he could not have put his disagreement into words, and if he had been alone with her, her eloquence would have failed for want of opposition, just as the fen water becomes flat and forceless for want of resisting banks. But he loved to hear her talk like this. He was the lame man watching his wife dance with another partner, and rejoicing in her grace.

“That is what I always say,” he went on, pleased to agree with her on one point. “Lyne is a Christian without knowing it.”

Gabriel laughed.

“I admit that I act from instinct, but my opinions are the result of an attempt on my part to examine and compare my instincts, to put them into thought for the sake of adjusting them and finding for them a logical basis.”

“I am afraid that is beyond me,” said Mrs. Gateacre,

with a touch of affected indolence. "Now you are talking like your book, Mr. Lyne."

"I am afraid that I was quoting from it unconsciously, which is not fair. Here is an instance of what I mean. I feel the instinct of self-preservation and obey it, but it is impossible for me to do so and admit at the same time that I am doing a foolish thing, as Canon Presyllett admits it; that I am taking trouble to retain an unpleasant and unsatisfactory existence, when by taking none I could be admitted at once to a perfect existence. I therefore deny existence after death. In every case where my instinct and my creed clash, I either disobey the instinct or change my creed. The result is that my creed, whether right or wrong, is at one with my life."

"That is a delicious attitude. I wish I could adopt it," laughed the lady. "You do whatever you like, and then decide that it is right because you do it."

Her amusement was catching, and the Squire and Gabriel joined in it.

"I am afraid you are enunciating the attitude of a good many people, professed Christians and others, Mrs. Gateacre. But it is not my attitude. When an instinct like that of self-preservation appeals to me conclusively, I justify it by a principle; and the worst of a principle is that it will not change, however awkward it becomes in special cases. The principle which lets me send for the doctor when I am ill, without admitting myself an illogical fool, also prevents me taking two glasses of champagne at supper, or of indulging in any other excess that might lessen my length of life by an instant, without admitting that I am an illogical fool after all. So you see, madam, that by reading the law of the Creator—or of Nature if you like—from my instincts instead of from a collection of Hebrew manuscripts, I still find some injunction to restraint."

"Yes, I can understand you taking care of your health, but how about the sacrifices you make for others?"

"I trust I make none which are foolish. I do not admit the assertion or inference of Christianity that the perfectly selfish man is the happiest man, or gets most satisfaction to

his instincts, as we are calling them, even in a life which has no appendix. The desire for love, friendship, and respect are as much instincts—are they not?—as the desire for health; and it is as logical and sensible to make sacrifices of the immediate impulses in order to satisfy the desire for friendship, as to satisfy the desire for health.”

The Squire was becoming rather restive, as he always did when his friend approached the subject of his creed.

“That is all very well for you, my boy,” he put in quickly at the first opportunity. “As Rachel says, you have been born with the instincts of a Christian; but I know that I should be a worse man than I am if I had nothing to think of but my instincts, and so would the rest of the world. The great majority of people could not get on without Christianity.”

“John is always afraid that you will convert me to your views,” said Mrs. Gateacre, smiling. “He only let me read your book because he knew I should not understand it. But I do not think that there is much fear. It is all very well for you, a young man without connections, and with a literary reputation to support you, to declare yourself an infidel; but it would not do for me.”

“Even if you were one?”

“Yes, even if I were one. I should not give up Christianity whatever opinions I had. It would cause a scandal; it would not be respectable. It is very shocking of me, I know; but, you see, I follow my instincts, not my opinions, which brings us back to our starting-point, I believe.”

“Yes, we were talking about Mrs. Presyllett,” said Gabriel, pitying the look of anxiety on his host’s face. “You were saying that a change in her religious views would not be disastrous to her married happiness.”

“I meant if her religious fanaticism wore off and left her the human lovable woman that I think she will become in time. It is fanaticism, of course, to wear that bonnet and object to a tea-party or tennis on principle. If she exchanged her religious fanaticism for a fanaticism the other way——”

"Like mine," suggested Gabriel, with the ready twinkle in his eye.

"If you like. Then of course there would be 'ructions' with the Canon. But it is very seldom a woman gets enthusiastic over logic. A woman will sacrifice everything for a person—for Jesus, for instance. She will sacrifice nothing for an idea, as you will. There is always a man at the back of her ideas, to personify them when she becomes enthusiastic about them. I am hoping that Mrs. Presyllett will tone down and become human. It would be nice for us, and would hurt nobody. The Canon would notice nothing. If she ceased to visit the poor as a matter of conscience, she would visit them through natural kindness of heart and because it is expected of a clergyman's wife; but she would spare a little time then to come and take tea with me. If she ceased to go to church for holiness she would go for custom, and the result would be the same, except that she would chat with people in the porch instead of looking like a statue of the Madonna all the while. I do not think that the Canon would feel anything but pleasure in his heart of hearts if he found her putting a few flowers in her bonnet and adopting a prettier dress. That is the change that I am looking forward to, and it is the change which I have seen taking place in all the 'unco-guid' people I have known. They don't bother about principles; they become nicer naturally. Wait till she has children of her own. I have never known a woman yet whose religious scruples against bright colours were stronger than her desire to make her baby look pretty."

The Squire and Gabriel glanced at one another again; Mrs. Gateacre caught the look and understood it.

"John has been trying to make you share his absurd idea about the marriage," she said, colouring a little in spite of her years and maternity, "but that is all rubbish. John has been idealising the Canon because he has dry bread and water for supper; but I do not believe in ideal people. I think that we are all very much alike; and John's idea would make our friends at the Rectory very different from other people, wouldn't it? John and I have a wager that in a year's time——"

"But that does not concern Lyne," put in the Squire hastily. A man is always more reticent than a woman on certain subjects, because in a man's mind alone they are inseparably associated with impure jests and levity. A woman can speak without shame, because she has never spoken except seriously. That is why we have the amusing spectacle to-day of impure men being shocked by the novels of pure women.

Gabriel Lyne was almost as pure-minded as a woman, but he pitied the uneasiness of his host, and turned into another pathway of the debate.

"The real reason that I thought a change of creed or the least loss of her present creed on Mrs. Presyllett's part would be deplorable is this. It must change her estimate of her husband. If she comes to think that eating dry bread and water for supper is foolish, then the Canon must appear rather foolish, and she will wake to find herself bound for life to a fanatic, instead of the ideal of holiness she married."

Mrs. Gateacre laughed.

"She will only be like every other woman who has ever married. I do not think there is one of them who loves her husband for the same reason which induced her to marry him. We all think our lovers an ideal of something or other, and by the time that we have found out that they are ordinary men, discover that we love them all the more because they are ordinary men and our husbands. It always amuses me to compare my dear old boy with the animated waxwork model of a Radical reformer that I thought I was marrying. Women admire ideal men sufficiently to marry them, but I don't think they really love them until they have found out their faults. By the time that Mrs. Presyllett has lost her respect for saints, she will have found her particular one surreptitiously putting butter on his supper-bread, or being led astray by a partiality for oysters or something, and will thank Heaven that she has a man to spoil, to scold, and to help, instead of an image in a glass-case to worship. John has been proving to me quite conclusively that the Rector's wife will



be miserable, and that it was our duty to prevent her marrying him. As a matter of logic he is quite right: she has married him in a spirit of fanaticism which will wear off, and he is marrying her in the idea that her fanaticism is not a girlish phase of character, but something permanent. Logically the union ought to be disastrous, and we ought to have moved heaven and earth, as John wanted to do, to prevent it; but I do not trust logic myself. As I said, I follow my instincts, and my instincts made me mind my own business as usual, while my experience told me that the Rector and his wife will settle down to a very comfortable married life, in spite of logic."

"I hope that they will," said Lyne gravely, and his heart was with his words.

## CHAPTER XIII

THE two Tomtits walked through the village street with more sedateness even than usual, feeling that the eyes of the world were upon them. For they wore the dresses which they had had made alike for the wedding, and everybody must know that they were on their way to the Rectory to make the place look home-like for the return of the newly married pair. Each carried a large bunch of garden flowers rather ostentatiously, for the flowers must suggest their purpose. Miss Prudence carried hers a little more ostentatiously than her sister, for she thought that it was the larger of the two.

Along the deserted road they had been arguing fiercely as to their mode of procedure when they reached the house. Prudence wanted them to concentrate their forces; Iphigenia, who had a pet scheme for the arrangement of her flowers, wished to concentrate her attention on the hall and leave the rest of the house to her sister.

A question of such seriousness could not be decided, of course, in ten minutes, but it was tacitly abandoned as soon as the first house came in sight. The Tomtits never argued seriously in public.

Conscious of their importance and superiority to the rest of womankind on the day of their niece's return, the little women sailed along with hearts and faces full of a condescending amiability. They even crossed the road to speak to a passing lady of their acquaintance whom on ordinary occasions they would have passed on the same side with a barely perceptible nod.

"How do you do?" said Prudence, making a show of difficulty in holding her flowers in one hand while she extended the other.

"A beautiful day for their return, is it not?" said Iphigenia; and then they both chattered out together, "We are taking a few flowers—" and each stopped, angry with the other for having shown her pride so plainly.

"To trim the arch?" said their friend. "There will certainly be room for them. It looks all paper at present."

The Tomtits were sorry that they had stopped.

"We are taking these to decorate the home a little," said Prudence stiffly.

"Adrian is so fond of flowers," said Iphigenia, proudly emphasising her right to use the Canon's christian name, although she had never ventured yet to address him by it.

The Gateacres' victoria came by driving rapidly, and they stopped it as if they had news of the utmost importance to convey to its occupant.

Mrs. Gateacre, who sat there alone, was rather surprised to find them with nothing more important to remark than that the day was a pleasant one for their niece's return, and that they were on their way to the Rectory to make preparations for the home-coming.

"Poor little Tomtits," she said when she had left them, "it is a pity, as John says, that the Canon did not marry one of them instead of their niece. But then, it would have been cruel to the other one. I wonder if they would not both have found husbands if they had only been less alike."

The old maids went on their way rejoicing, and did not resume their wrangle about the decorations until the gate of the Rectory garden had closed behind them.

"I don't care what you are going to do," said Iphigenia aggressively, "I am going to make the hall look nice for them."

"So am I," said Prudence, with quiet determination.

"Very well! I will leave it to you, and look after the other rooms."

"I shall look after them too," said Prudence. "I really don't see why I should be warned off any part of the house."

"How absurd you are, Prudence! You know that we share everything at home."

"Because some of the things are yours and some are mine," said Prudence, who had come to look upon the division as an order of nature, not a mere matter of arrangement; "but the Rectory does not belong to either of us."

They were still wrangling when they reached the door, which Iphigenia opened with a delicious sense of semi-possession, while Prudence rang the bell to announce their arrival.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Iphigenia, and Prudence tried to look over her shoulder.

"Whatever is the matter, Fidge?"

"Look!" said Iphigenia, quite breathless, and she waved her little hand dramatically towards the hall table covered with beautiful hothouse flowers.

"Wherever did these come from?" she asked tartly as the solemn housemaid appeared, and the girl smiled for the first time in the old maids' knowledge of her.

"A great many ladies of the congregation have been with flowers this morning, Miss Gaydon. The house looks quite like a conservatory."

Her eyes were fixed on the poor little bunches they carried, in a way that made the Tomtits wish that they had dropped them in the garden outside.

The attitude of the unmarried ladies of the congregation towards the Rector's marriage had undergone much the same change as that of the Gaydons. After uniting in dispraise of the wife whom Canon Presyllett had preferred to themselves, they had each awakened to the fact that the dispraise suggested jealousy, and since the marriage was inevitable, had exerted themselves to appear enthusiastic about it, and affectionate towards the bride. Hence the triumphal archway over the village street.

The enthusiasm was catching, and Angela's prettiness had won other friends besides the Squire's wife among the married people of the parish—friends who were eager for some means of showing their kindness. Hence the store of flowers which brightened the sombre house everywhere.

The Tomtits gazed at them disconsolately as the maid led them through every room, their eyes vainly searching for

some unostentatious spot in which their garden flowers would not be rendered insignificant by the hothouse blooms which reigned everywhere.

"Miss Butcher said they were still wanting flowers for the arch," suggested the maid, and the Tomtits jerked their heads round together. Miss Butcher was the spinster they had stopped in the village street.

"Has she been here?" they asked in a breath.

"Yes, miss. She brought those magnificent lilies in the study, those in the vase on the mantelshelf."

The old maids looked at one another.

"Did Mrs. Gateacre bring any flowers?" asked Prudence faintly.

"Yes, miss, quite a carriageful. Most of those in the hall were hers."

"It is a pity that so many hothouse flowers have been brought," said Iphigenia irritably. "They make the house smell quite sickly."

Her sister was too cross even to agree with her.

"I am sure that it is very kind of everybody," she said. "It is nice to think that our dear Angela has so many friends."

She was quite enthusiastic about the flowers to the Canon's housekeeper, who had appeared to inquire whether the ladies would take tea, as the home-comers were not expected for some hours. The housekeeper was a taciturn widow of fifty who had been in the Canon's family and that of his father all her life, and she had acquired a semi-ecclesiastical air, which made Squire Gateacre, with his fondness for nicknames, dub her "the Abbess," and speak of her to his wife as a cross between a pew-opener and a bishop. She stepped noiselessly as if in church, and her approach had been heralded only by the rustling of her black silk dress, unornamented except by a huge jet necklace and suspended cross.

"Thank you very much," said Prudence, "we should like a cup of tea."

There was a certain silent hostility in the Abbess's manner which she had always shown towards the Canon's spinster

friends, and it made the little Tomtit more than usually genial and gushing. "We came early in case the house needed brightening up at all, but I am glad to say that there is nothing for us to do. The place looks beautiful, does it not? quite like a conservatory, as Jane says. She has been showing us through the rooms. My niece is very fortunate to have so many kind friends."

"Canon Presyllett has always been very much liked in the parish," said the Abbess in her monotonously low voice, and Prudence nodded like a bird.

"As he deserves to be. You will have dinner ready for them, I suppose, when they arrive?"

The housekeeper bowed.

"Canon Presyllett sent full directions as to the preparations which were to be made."

"What a horrible woman she is!" said Iphigenia when they were alone; "she always gives me the 'creeps.' I am sure that it won't be nice for dear Angela to have her in the house. The Canon ought to dispense with her services now he is married, and if Angela needs any assistance in the management of the house—of course she is quite undomesticated—I am sure that we should neither of us mind coming here to help her at first. We could take it in turns."

They talked the arrangement over all through their tea-drinking, which they were left to enjoy alone, and became very amicable in their perfect agreement that the housekeeper ought to be discarded at once. They chatted away in the most friendly spirit until the question arose which of them should be the first to assume the management of the house.

It was well that they had something to occupy their minds, for the time hung heavily on their hands. After tea they wandered disconsolately through the house, looking in vain for something to alter.

For want of it, they wandered out to the stables, and tried hard to make the groom start with the carriage which was to bring the home-comers back from Barnwood, half-an-hour before the Canon had directed him, or before there

was the slightest need for him to harness the horses. It was very hard for them to stand by and do nothing to help in the reception, and they almost regretted that they had refused Mrs. Gateacre's kind offer to drive them over to the town to meet Angela at the station.

They had to employ themselves deciding what alterations they would make in the place when Mrs. Graeme was gone, and luckily differed as to the utilisation of a room they had seen empty. Prudence thought that it should be turned into a store-room, Iphigenia thought it might come in useful as a nursery.

"I shall suggest that, at any rate, to dear Angela," she said; and Prudence turned upon her reprovingly.

"Iphigenia, how can you be so indelicate!"

"We have not decided what to do with our flowers yet," said Iphigenia, changing the subject for want of a reply.

"Where did you put yours?"

"I laid them down somewhere in the drawing-room," said Prudence.

"So did I."

They had both dropped them unostentatiously behind the nearest object of furniture as the Abbess entered the room.

"I suppose that we shall have to put them somewhere," said Prudence dejectedly; "we cannot leave them lying about."

But they showed no eagerness to re-enter the house and take possession of their offerings.

They had long since wandered out into the garden together, unable to remain in the house, where the grim housekeeper insisted on opposing every suggestion they made, quoting the Canon's authority for every opposition. In the austere old-world garden they could squabble unrestrained, and enjoy a certain sense of part-proprietorship in its beauties, and they did not return indoors until the lamps were lighted in the big gloomy dining-room, where the table was being laid. The Abbess, with every duty performed, was sitting in state in the drawing-room ready for the Rector's arrival.

Iphigenia with a nervous glance caught sight of her own bunch of flowers under the chair on which she was seated.

"I suppose that you will find the Rectory different now that it has a mistress," said Prudence in a confidentially sympathetic manner.

"Canon Presyllett assures me that it will make no difference in my position or duties," said the widow, with the softness of tone of the pew-opener, but something of the stateliness of the bishop as well.

"Still, it is sure to make changes," said Iphigenia cheerfully.

It seemed hours to her and to her sister before the welcome sound of carriage-wheels was heard on the drive, and both Tomtits jumped excitedly to their feet.

"Here they are!" they both exclaimed together, and they hurried to the entrance, each anxious to be the first to greet Angela.

Prudence came off victor, and Iphigenia, in her jealousy of her, and in the excitement of her worked-up enthusiasm, surprised the Canon by standing on tiptoe, putting her arms round his neck and kissing him.

He seemed more startled than pleased by the embrace, and Iphigenia was fiery red as she darted at her niece, set free by Prudence.

"How well you are looking," she twittered with pure conventionality, and added, as she saw that the conventional remark was untrue, "only a little pale. The travelling must have tired you."

"I am rather tired," said Angela coldly, and she glanced round the decorated hall without enthusiasm. She even shuddered a little at the profusion of flowers on the hall table.

There seemed to her something strangely out of place in the affectionate enthusiasm of her aunts, in these emblems of congratulation. If the convent she was entering had been a convent in the eyes of the world, she would have been touched by the kindness of those who kissed her on the threshold and lined the path to her cell with flowers, congratulating her on the devotion of her life to God.



But if her convent had been a real convent, her aunts would have been weeping over her, and the flowers would have been absent. They only lined the path to her cell because everybody took it for a bridal chamber.

It might be true that everything was emblematic. The marriage was an emblem; the honeymoon, the triumphal arch, and the congratulations of friends, were all emblems, as the Canon had pointed out clearly; but each emblem as it appeared shocked her with the vivid contrast which the symbol presented to the thing symbolised, and filled her with a sense of shame, as if she were acting a lie.

Her face was indeed very pale as she stood in the light of the hall-lamp, and when she spoke calmly and without emotion, as she usually did, all the excited anticipation with which the little Tomtits had looked forward to her return died away, and a sense of gloomy melancholy took its place, in spite of the Canon's evident effort to appear less austere than usual.

They had allowed their conception of a returning bride to supersede the picture of their nun-like niece in their minds, and the contrast chilled them.

The dinner was not a cheerful meal, although the Canon exerted himself to talk industriously about their holiday, which appeared to have been little more than a succession of visits to different churches and philanthropic meetings. To some of them the Rector admitted that he had gone alone, Angela preferring to see a large children's hospital, and to accompany a clerical friend of his through an unsavoury part of White-chapel. It sounded to the romantic little spinsters a very unromantic record, and they found it difficult to show sufficient enthusiasm in the recital to keep it alive. They sat and pecked away at their dinners, feeling almost as comfortable as if they were dining in church. Angela scarcely joined in the conversation, only becoming enthusiastic once about the hospital.

"It made me feel the use of my money," she said; "although Canon Presyllett thought I was extravagant."

The Rector frowned slightly. He did not like his wife to call him "Canon Presyllett;" and Angela's determination

to spend her own money as she pleased was bad enough to bear without others knowing that she insisted on maintaining her complete independence with regard to it.

"I reminded my wife," he said, smiling with a sweet resignation, "that there was a hospital in Barnwood if she wished to endow a cot."

"But the hospital at Barnwood is so rich," said Angela, with a new animation which brought colour to her cheeks. "There are no cots empty for want of funds, and no poor miserable little creatures waiting for them, as there are in London. And they are all God's little ones. He is none the less their Father because they live in another neighbourhood."

"Of course not, dear," said the Canon in his pulpit tone, "but it is a dangerous example to set people. If everybody chose to neglect the local charities it would be very disastrous."

Angela did not answer, but her animation died out. She felt that she had done right in endowing the London cot, and she would have carried on the argument if she had not known that all argument was absolutely wasted on her husband.

Ten days before, she would have taken his verdict as the verdict of the earthly representative of God, but the ten days had been days of disillusionment, and Angela had learned to look in his decisions for a leaven of expediency which to her straightforward mind made it impossible for them to be the decisions of God.

She seemed glad to retire to the drawing-room, and surprised Iphigenia by putting her arm in hers as they walked upstairs. She was feeling very lonely, poor girl: for the loneliness which comes from uncongenial companionship is much greater than that of complete isolation. She had been content to shut herself up with her soul, but it seemed to her as if her soul was taken away from her when all its dictates were labelled as wrong ones.

The Abbess had remained to give some directions to the maid, and as they entered the drawing-room Iphigenia made a dart for her neglected nosegay, and pushed it into her niece's hands.

"I brought you a few flowers from the garden at home, dear. The others are more beautiful perhaps, but I thought that you would like these simple ones better."

Prudence was frantically groping behind a cabinet, but she was too late. Before she could present hers, Angela had kissed the homely wallflowers which Iphigenia had presented, and then, to the little old maid's mingled consternation and pleasure, had thrown her arms impulsively round her neck and burst into tears.

## CHAPTER XIV

THERE is almost inevitably something disastrous to hero-worship in too intimate an acquaintance with its object. Even the saints may have been fortunate in disappearing before the evolution of a prying daily journalism and the invention of the interview.

In daily life it is impossible for any man to invariably maintain an heroic pose, and the light in which Angela saw Adrian Presyllett in their daily companionship was very different from the conception which she had formed of him before her marriage.

The eloquent preacher, with face illuminated by spiritual enthusiasm, and carefully modulated voice uttering only divine truths, seemed to her quite another person from the dyspeptic man who came down late to breakfast, in an irritable temper because the coffee was cold and he had been searching ten minutes for a collar-stud.

Angela was very young, and it came as a shock to her to find that a clergyman is a man.

The bitterness of her discovery lay in the fact that she had only entered into the marriage through a belief in the Canon's infallibility. She had accepted his enunciation of her duty as if he were the mouthpiece of God, and before she had been married to him twelve hours she had found in his character a hundred faults which suggested to her unwilling mind that his judgments were less single-minded than her own.

The first shock had come on the honeymoon journey. In the train she had attacked the subject of the tenement-house at Barnwood. She had grand projects, inspired by the stranger she had met there, of knocking it down and build-

ing in its place an ideal model dwelling, which would be an example to property owners and a blessing to the poor. She had intentionally reserved her project till after the wedding, so that it might mark the commencement of their partnership in good works. She was prepared to lavish her share of money on it—for she was keeping her fortune in her own hands—and she plunged enthusiastically into her subject.

“My dear child,” said her husband, with a smile, “there is no need for you to trouble about the house now. I took to heart your little oration about it, and am glad to say that it is no longer on my hands. I might certainly have brought discredit upon my calling if I had retained it.”

“And you have pulled it down already!” she cried enthusiastically. “How good of you. But we shall have to build a good house in its place, or the poor tenants will have nowhere to go.”

“That is a work outside my province,” he said, rather more coldly. “My duties do not give me time for this branch of philanthropy.”

“But if you have pulled the house down——” she began, and he interrupted her with his first sign of irritability.

“I have not pulled it down. All I wished to say is that it is no longer on my hands. When you spoke to me I instructed my agents to dispose of it, and the sale has just been effected.”

“And who has bought it?” she asked, the animation fading slowly from her face.

“I cannot say. I left the matter entirely in the hands of my business man.”

“But if the new owner is a grasping man, the poor tenants will only be worse off than they were before, won't they?” she said wonderingly, and the unconscious reproof in her voice nettled him. When he had spoken before their marriage of her helping him, he had scarcely meant that she was to criticise his actions. He had rather some pleasant conception in his mind of himself enunciating truth, and his wife helping him by agreeing that he was right.

“While the house was yours you could have seen that

there was no gross cruelty or extortion," she went on, "but now we are quite powerless."

"My duties are really too heavy for me to have thought of undertaking any responsibility in the case," he said, feeling, while he excused himself, that it was rather beneath his dignity to do so. "To have rebuilt the house would have taken a great deal of time and money."

"But if we are giving it to God?" she said. "I have money. I meant to help. I wish that I had known you were selling the house."

"Why?"

"I should have bought it myself."

She spoke quite innocently, out of the fulness of her faith that they were to be two independent people, each working for God in the groove that suited them. It was with this idea that she had kept control of her own fortune as a matter of course. She had looked forward to her companionship with the Canon as a substitute for and fac-simile of her companionship with Cecile, and it was really the thought of the contrast of reality to her dream which had broken down her self-control at the sight of Iphigenia's wallflowers. For, although she did not spoil her aunt's pleasure by mentioning the fact, wallflowers grew everywhere in the garden of the old *château* in Auvergne as well as behind Lilac Lodge.

To Canon Presyllett, with his almost mediæval ideas of the relative position of man and woman, of husband and wife, such a view of their partnership was impossible. He had consented to her perfect freedom of action after the marriage, because he had not conceived the possibility of her meditating any action without his direction and guidance.

Her suggestion about the house appeared to him childish and shocking, and he reproved her for it as he would have done a child. He was glad of the opportunity after her implied reproach.

"My dear child, you must not talk in this absurd strain," he said gravely. "You must not forget that in the eyes of the world we are now one, and the fact of your buying the house from me would make us both appear ridiculous. We

cannot act in opposition to each other. I should not have consented to your keeping your fortune in your own hands if I had dreamed that you were capable of formulating such absurd schemes with it."

His implied control roused a fierce feeling of opposition in her heart, for her love of her own way, as we have seen, was one of the main strands of the golden cord which bound her to a religious life. Only her lingering faith in his holiness, which his perfectly callous action with regard to the rookery had shaken to its foundations, prevented her answering defiantly.

"I did not think of acting in opposition to you," she said, controlling herself. "I was only thinking that if the only reason for selling the house was lack of time and money, I have both; that we could share duties in that way, and help each other."

"I think that your time and money will be much better employed on our own parish," he said, a touch of pettishness mingling with his pastoral manner.

"But why?" she asked wonderingly. "The poor tenants at Barnwood are no less God's poor because they live three miles away from the Rectory."

She was still honestly hoping that he would show her that his course was right and hers wrong in some manner, as the stranger had shown her that her course had been wrong in running the risk of infection, even when she had felt so sure that she was doing right. She was longing for a similar enlightenment now which would allow her to retain her idea of her husband's infallibility.

The Canon was angry with himself for having argued with her. He had not married to have his actions and decisions criticised by a girl.

"It ought to be sufficient for you that I state my opinion," he said, desecrating his pulpit voice in her sight by using it to save himself from admitting that his decision had been a merely selfish and worldly one. "You must remember that you are very young to pit your opinions against mine."

"But I am not pitting my opinion against yours, Canon

Presyllett," she said in distress. "I am only asking how it can possibly be right to leave the poor people, from whom you have drawn money, to suffer, when it is so easy to see how we could help them."

As a matter of fact, the practical philanthropy which luckily absorbed so much of the girl's religious ardour made no appeal to the ecclesiastic. He had sold the rookery as the simplest means of avoiding a duty which was distasteful to him, which would draw his attention more or less away from channels which he thought more purely religious. But he was conscious of his inability to make this reason appear in a very appealing light to his wife, and her questioning irritated him in consequence.

He ended it by a rebuke which was little more than an outburst of temper, although it was couched in religious phraseology and supported by a text.

He told her that a husband stood to his wife in the place of God.

"But I am not your wife—in the eyes of God," she said, quoting the words of their compact as he himself had enunciated them—before the marriage; and she froze into silence, subdued by his manner, but altogether unconvinced.

If there was no free exchange of opinions between them, how could they ever help each other? She tried to think that it was right to leave the poor Barnwood tenants to their misery, because he had said that it was; but the attempt was a vain one, and she was left with the painful conviction that she saw God's will more plainly than her guide.

Involuntarily there rose up before her mind's eye the contrasting figure of a tall, handsome, earnest-eyed man, who had shown her her duty in a new light and made her realise it so clearly, who had answered openly when she criticised his conduct in turn, and who had no need to fall back for support upon the respect due to his position. She sighed a little as she leaned back in the silent railway carriage.

After the meeting with Gabriel Lyne, whose name she did not yet know, in the slum, she had found her greatest



pleasure, in considering the approaching marriage, lie in the hope that she might be of some spiritual assistance even to a holy man like her husband. His failure of duty in regard to the unsanitary house suggested that there might be duties which he was forgetting, and of which she might remind him, even slight faults which she might correct. It was part of her spiritual ambition to correct faults in people, and she was just a little merciless in exposing them, as the poor of Windlehurst had found, and the rich were about to discover.

No sooner was she married than she found in the Canon's character a hundred more faults than she had expected; but when she tried to point them out to him, he was startled and shocked by her presumption, and lectured her severely, in his pastoral manner, on her preposterous assumption of moral superiority. He had been far too long occupied in correcting other people's sins to let a girl lecture him on his own. All equal argument with him was impossible.

He was selfish, with a perfect unconsciousness of his vice which made it more glaring. His long social isolation had inevitably left him so. Accustomed as he had been for years to look at every interference with his will as so much spiritual discord opposing the dictates of his conscience, it never occurred to him to examine such interferences in the light of a voice from another conscience and will with equal rights to consideration with his own.

When he had decided, for instance, that his chances of extended usefulness in the Church, and therefore his duty to God, led him to call on the Winlays, Angela's bigoted disinclination to waste on social functions the time that might be given more distinctly to her Master did not appeal to him as something holy. Rather it was a disinclination on her part to do her duty, and was rebuked as such.

"You need not accompany me unless you wish," he had said, as if making allowance for worldly selfishness; and he had been angry when she took him at his word. He had not expected her to do so when her action would appear to his friends so strange.

He explained to her irritably that it would excite remark if he went anywhere alone so early in the honeymoon; but

he was only a man pleading expediency in support of his own wishes, not a spiritual leader urging duty towards God, and his words fell on deaf ears.

Her conscience told her to do right, and let the world think what it would; while her pride made her take just a little delight in shocking conventional people, and doing as many things as possible differently from them.

She had agreed to a certain amount of conventionality over the marriage on the word of her spiritual superior, who assured her that it was necessary for the attainment of a special holy object; but she refused utterly to make concessions which were only urged for the sake of convenience, and to prevent the world thinking them strange. She saw in it only the suggestion of moral weakness and worldly cowardice, and every plea for it from the Canon served to make her feel his spiritual inferiority to herself, just as his irritation and his selfishness did.

This realisation, while it made her more than ever determined to follow the dictates of her own conscience in flat defiance of her husband's wishes or protests, made her more and more uncertain whether she ought ever to have entered into the marriage with him. Might not his justification of its apparent deceit be just as much a piece of ungodly casuistry as that with which he was trying to make her do what he wanted at every step? If he had been imprudent enough at that moment to admit to her that his chance of obtaining a better living depended largely upon his possession of a wife, she would probably have renounced the marriage at once, and returned to Lilac Lodge, unconcerned by what people would say about her proceedings.

But the very fact that her partnership with the Canon was robbed by his character of all personal pleasantness, helped her to look at the tie in the light of a duty. The old idea which made our forefathers judge the efficacy of a medicine in proportion to its nauseousness, was at the root of her religious creed, and it was an article of faith with her that, of two courses, the one is right which is the less pleasing.

It is this axiom which simplifies a woman's creed, and

makes her accept the ethics of Christianity with less sense of insufficiency than a man. The passion that a good man like Gabriel Lyne has for truth, fairness, and consistency, is balanced in the feminine nature by a passion for self-sacrifice. All she asks for in a creed is a justification of the sacrifice which appeals to her, and Christianity gives it completely, justifying the axiom by which she decides between right and wrong. It is this glorification of self-sacrifice overpowering the admiration of every other virtue in a woman's nature, which fills the Christian churches with bonnets, while it probably does more than anything else to encourage vice, brutality, and egotism in men. Men will never cease to domineer over and wrong women until the latter realise that it is not always more holy to suffer than to revolt.

Poor Angela's dream of helpful companionship with a saint whose every word and action would help her to become more godlike, above all of an untrammelled liberty in which she could follow the dictates of conscience, without the distraction of a single remonstrating voice with its plea of worldly prudence or conventionality, had disappeared quickly when she found her husband determined to direct her every movement, and to weigh every penny she gave in charity without his sanction; but in its place she found a burden to be taken up for God, and she had no thought of turning back. After all, she had consented to the marriage, not for the companionship she found so uncongenial, but to increase her usefulness and freedom.

Her freedom she fought for with that irritating calmness which sprang from the consciousness that her will was more the will of God than that of the Canon who opposed it. His faults she bore patiently, making no further useless attempt to correct them, but shielding herself from their effect in her marble mould of pious artificial emotionlessness.

On her knees, where she spent much of her time in her room at night, she thanked her heavenly Father for having saved her from letting her devotion to Him deteriorate into devotion to one of His imperfect servants, and begged His help to enable her to bear patiently this cross which He had been pleased to lay upon her.

The opportunities of increased usefulness offered her by her position as the Rector's wife spread out before her now as the one justification of her empty marriage, and the one means she had of forgetting its unpleasantness.

On her return to Windlehurst after the ill-advised honeymoon's ten days of martyrdom, she threw herself into her duties with an ardour which was rather hard on the good people of the place, who had certainly not asked her to marry, but who found themselves obliged to suffer for the fact.

Now that the Rector's weaknesses had been made known to her, she could no longer leave the spiritual welfare of his perishing flock to his charge, and she startled the helpless Canon by informing him that she had decided upon a house to house visitation to persuade every member of the congregation to give their hearts more thoroughly to God.

"Among the poor it might do good," he said uneasily; and Angela answered, with her cold calm—

"The poor seem to me to be nearer God than the rich. I shall go to all."

"But you are sure to offend people," he pleaded. The idea shocked him. It was all very well for her to intrude upon the humbler cottages, where her constant charity and helpfulness made her a welcome visitor; but her social equals! It was an insult to speak to such people privately and directly, without invitation, about their souls.

He tried to express it in Biblical language, but Angela saw only, in his words, the plea of a worldly man trembling for his social reputation and his Easter offerings, and she went on her way as usual to obey the dictates of God and her conscience.

When Gabriel Lyne paid one of his rare visits to the Hall, he found Mrs. Gateacre completely incensed against his Nun.

"Has she not begun to tone down yet?" he asked, smiling; and the matron held up her hands.

"Toned down! Why, she is possessed with seven more devils of fanaticism than before. Yesterday she came here on purpose to plead with me to go to church in a cloak

like hers, to set an example to the villagers. 'How can your thoughts or theirs be really centred on God when your church-going is little more than an opportunity for display?' she asked me. And I was so prepared to like her. I actually kissed her when she came in, and thought she had come over simply for a cup of tea and a gossip about her wedding presents, like a sensible girl. She was luckily out when I paid my visit to the Rectory. I hear that she talked to Miss Butcher about nothing but her soul, and prayed with her, instead of showing her her presents. I am sick of her."

"And did you hear about Jakes the butcher?" put in the Squire, smiling. "He was converted at the mission services, you know, and put a notice up in his shop: 'The Leopard has changed his Spots.' As soon as the services were over he resumed his spots, and has been drunk ever since. Mrs. Presyllett found him in a maudlin mood, and made him promise that whenever the craving for drink came on him again, whether by night or day, he would come to her at the Rectory, and let her pray with him and make him cups of tea until the temptation was passed. She is a practical young woman in her way, you see. The next night they were roused at the Rectory just after midnight by the furious ringing of the door-bell. Everybody got up, thinking the house was on fire. 'It is only poor Jakes,' said Mrs. Presyllett, running down in her dressing-gown. 'Nobody need be disturbed. I told him to come, and am going to pray with him.' As it happened, they had to lay him in the coach-house instead. The poor man had muddled up his instructions and got hopelessly, speechlessly drunk *before* he sought his good angel's assistance."

Gabriel was good-natured enough to laugh, but there was something more pathetic than amusing in these glimpses of an honest woman struggling to carry out the actual ethics of Christianity in a society which has made Christianity simply a name and protection for conventional propriety and etiquette.

"You still wear a pretty dress, I see, in spite of the lecture," he said, turning to Mrs. Gateacre; and the good lady shrugged her broad shoulders.

"What do you think? A girl scarcely out of school, too."

And she went on totting up the amounts which were passed through her hands to send missionaries out to the heathen and tell them that their long-established customs were all wicked.

"Mrs. Presyllett will be trying to convert you next," she said when she looked up.

"I hope not," said Gabriel gravely.

## CHAPTER XV

THE question of the Sunday opening of the Windlehurst reading-room did not, when Squire Gateacre decided to dismiss the subject for a time from his mind, cease to occupy the attention of others in the village. The leaders of the movement having failed for want of the Squire's casting vote to gain their cause, suddenly bethought themselves of the advisability of getting up a petition among the inhabitants of the village in favour of the opening, and were canvassing vigorously for signatures.

The Canon came down to breakfast irritable, as he usually was in the morning, with the news. He took it as a personal movement against himself. He held the opinion so common among the official representatives of a meek and lowly Outcast, that his position made him a despotic monarch, and that any attempt in his little realm to act in opposition to his wishes was so much high-treason. It is the natural result of his spiritual authority. When it is his duty to enunciate the will of the Creator, each of his enunciations, social, political, or private, becomes inseparably associated in his mind with the Creator's will, and any opposition to his views becomes in his mind as heinous as opposition to the Creator.

With this natural confusion of thought, the Canon always *spoke* of the Sunday-opening movement as opposition to God, but always treated it as private opposition to himself. Nor was his treatment entirely without justification. Hodges, one of the most active supporters of the movement, was the village grocer, and had only adopted his views when the Canon decided that he could get his groceries more cheaply from the stores at Barnwood. It was he who had

thought of a public petition, which might win a wavering vote from the committee when Captain Benson once more opened the question at their meeting.

"The irreligious tendencies of the day are spreading everywhere," said the Canon petulantly, as he cracked his egg. "It is really terrible to think what even our rural parishes will become if this wave of free-thought continues. A year or two ago nobody would have dreamed of such a thing as openly advocating the desecration of the Sabbath, and now I hear that some of the most influential people in the parish are actually signing that man's shameless petition. I really don't know what I have done to make them delight in opposing me. There is Miss Butcher, for instance, whom I really thought that I had influenced during the mission services. Gateacre tells me that her name actually heads the list.—The coffee is cold again, as usual."

"Jane will make you some more," said Angela with her devout calm. "I could not delay breakfast, as I have promised to be at the schools when they open. I am speaking to the children after the opening prayers."

She rang the bell as she spoke without waiting for his reply, and went on talking about the petition.

"Do you think it would be of use to collect signatures against the opening of the reading-room? If so, I would canvass the village."

"I really don't know," he said impatiently. "It would be worse than useless if we got fewer names than Hodges, and according to the Squire he has already secured a good many. If we had only thought of a petition first. Besides, the decision does not really depend upon public opinion, but upon the votes of the committee."

"But surely nobody on the committee would vote for the desecration of Sunday?" asked Angela.

Her views on the subject of Sabbatarianism were the views which she had been taught as a child, and which she held with the unquestioning faith still of a child, to whom it has never for a moment occurred that any other view is honestly possible. The anti-Sabbatarians were not men who saw duty in a different light from herself—a light



which had the same claim to consideration as that in which she saw the question. They were men who knew what was right, and through carelessness of God's will preferred their own way, just as she herself might, if she wavered a moment in her devotion, wilfully mend her gloves on Sunday, and even make plausible excuses on the score of necessity or neatness to gloss over her sin.

"You must take very little interest in the work of the parish," said the Canon, "or you would know that the committee is equally divided, and that only the Squire's casting vote saves the reading-room from being thrown open, and the thin edge of a horrible secularism introduced into our very midst.—Isn't that coffee coming? My egg will be perfectly cold now."

There was some excuse to be made for his petulance, to those who understand the basis of his creed. When he had sunk his holiness to the point of committing a comparative sin and eating palatable food, it was very hard for him to lose any of its palatableness through the thoughtlessness of those around him.

Angela made no excuse, however, and merely glanced at the Abbess, who sat at the side of the table in grim silence. The good lady had always remained silent in the old days except when the Canon addressed her, and now that he had somebody else to address, she had become a sort of automaton at the table. Angela, after the first few attempts at friendliness, had been driven by her want of response into ignoring her, and probably pleased the taciturn widow as much by doing so as by leaving the management of the house absolutely in her hands. She rose now like a mechanical figure without sound to attend to the Rector's temporal necessities, while his wife pursued the subject of the reading-room.

"I am sorry I have not taken more interest in the place," she said. "It seemed to me so purely secular. But if there is any danger of its being made use of to introduce infidelity——"

"Of course there is fear. Gateacre, as I say, has the casting vote, and he is almost entirely under the influence

of that fellow Lyne. He has already threatened to join the other side."

"I will speak to Mr. Gateacre about it when I see him," said Angela.

"It would not be of the least use. I have used all my influence, but directly I have spoken Lyne takes him in hand and ruins all the good that I have done. Gateacre is infatuated with the fellow. He actually brought him here one day."

"Perhaps he hoped that you could turn the infidel's heart to God."

"I am afraid that he expected Lyne to turn mine," said the Canon; and Angela was trying to defend the Squire from an accusation so terrible, when the clock told her that she must start for the schools.

She was thinking of what the Canon had told her, and wondering what part she could play to stem the current of secularism in the parish, all the time that she was walking there, and she only ceased to ponder on it when she was in the schools. For she was fond of children, and she talked to them pleasantly in her sweet calm voice, giving them advice which would have made them as morbidly self-centred and self-righteous as herself if they had paid any real attention to her.

After the address, and a short inspection of the children which gave her an opportunity of increasing the conceit of the most priggish and unnatural among them with encouragement and praise, the "beautiful lady," as they called her, went back to her thoughts of the Windlehurst Infidel and the influence he was said to have obtained over the Squire.

She had heard Gabriel Lyne's name more than once, chiefly from the Rector, whose vituperative hostility only served to colour the conception of him which his title had made her form. Her conception was the usual childish one which makes the infidel a man who, having broken all God's laws, wilfully tries to exonerate himself by pretending that there is no God to punish him for it. There was another infidel in the village, a cobbler, who was usually drunk, and had been in prison, and who met her on his

threshold with foul abuse, and oaths which made her shudder. Her compact with him to give him twopence for every five minutes that he allowed her peacefully to read the Bible to him, was another of the stories current about her in the parish.

She always associated Gabriel Lyne in her mind with this man, for they were both infidels.

He was on her list of persons whom she must visit, and she was looking forward to ingratiating herself with him in much the same way as she had ingratiated herself with the cobbler. It was true that he was richer and more educated than the recipient of her twopences—she had gathered this much about him—but she expected him to cover her with abuse when she approached him, and to be touched by her sweet resignation, and the gift of flowers perhaps, and the fact that a good woman could talk even to an infidel as a brother in Christ and therefore a friend.

She had no fear of the encounter, and only the isolated position of the rationalist's cottage had caused his name to be among the last on her list. Now that his evil influence was threatening to affect the most important man from a social point of view in the place, it occurred to her that her visit ought to be hastened, and when she returned to the Rectory she tapped at the door of her husband's study.

The Canon was supposed to be composing his sermon for the Sunday, and she had to wait some minutes until he unlocked the door for her.

"Come in, dear," he said more brightly than he had spoken for some days past, and as Angela entered she noticed the look of spiritual exaltation on his face, which she had scarcely seen since her wedding day.

"I just called in to tell you that I may not be back to lunch," she said. "I have been giving a good deal of thought to what you told me about the reading-room committee, and I think that God has shown me a way in which I can possibly help."

Unconsciously she had adopted more and more since her marriage this pet phrase of his own, which robbed of half

its strength any opposition he might offer. Before he could claim the sanction of God for his opposition, his wife had always claimed it for her proposal.

To-day the Canon did not appear irritated by it. He was preserving the calm sweetness which had distinguished his manner before the wedding.

"Yes, dear," he said, smiling.

"If the decision about the Sunday opening depends on the Squire, and remonstrance is useless with him, we must go to the fountain-head. I am going to show this Gabriel Lyne how sinful the Sunday opening would be."

The smile died quickly from the Canon's thin face.

"But the man is an infidel."

"I know. But God can change the heart of an infidel."

"Yes, but not through the instrumentality of an untrained girl," he said with quick impatience. "You have had no experience of philosophical debate; you have never studied the arguments with which he will try and defend his pernicious doctrine."

Her lip curled a little.

"Is faith, then, a matter of book-learning?" she asked, with that fine scorn of intellectual effort in matters of belief which distinguishes the uneducated Christian. "Our Lord did not ask whether the humble fishermen He chose as His disciples had taken a university degree before sending them out to teach about Him."

For want of a ready argument he rebuked her irreverence, which really pained him, for her words had involuntarily conjured up in his mind some grotesque picture of St. Peter sweating through his "Little Go." For her a university degree was too vague a thing for the irreverence to appear, and she took his rebuke as a mere sign of weakness. She had learned his methods very quickly.

"I am sorry if I appeared irreverent," she said mechanically. "I did not intend it. I was only thinking that our Lord never considered secular learning and educational training necessary for those who were to teach about Him and for Him."

Her argument placed him in a strait, as it always did,

forcing him either to give the real reason of his objection, with the certainty that she would see its actual independence of the creed he professed, or inventing from the creed a reason which was inadequate.

He could not admit that she, with the great majority of Christians, believed simply through ignorance, and because she had heard no other side of the question. And this was what any actual explanation of his objection to her meeting the Infidel must amount to.

And still he could not let her follow her own way in this, as he was becoming accustomed to do. The idea of her meeting Gabriel Lyne, with his wonderful powers of persuasion and his logical invulnerability, filled him with a keen jealousy.

The tie that bound her to himself might be only a nominal one, but all his pride united in making him fight against the slightest chance of it ever being broken. And her perfectly independent nature made him dread the least weakening of the ascetic creed which had made her go through the ceremony of marriage with him. It was her faith which had led her into the false marriage, it was her faith which held her bound by it, and with eyes rendered clear by self-interest the Canon could see her faith crumbling away through contact with Gabriel Lyne. He could even imagine her, with her strange views of honesty and straightforwardness, admiring the Infidel more than himself, and the thought was gall and bitterness to him.

It was not that he loved her. Love was impossible to him without an upheaval of his whole nature and creed. But the girl's beauty filled him with a passion that was strong at the moment, and which made the mere nominal possession of her a thing of moment to him, which made him wildly jealous of the Infidel's superior physical attractions.

His face was full of eagerness as he tried with faint hopes to meet her on her own ground. If the ignorant fishermen were chosen to teach among the peasants of Galilee, he said, it was the highly educated and acutely philosophical St. Paul who was selected to meet the intellectual Athenians.

"But I am sure that if St. Peter had found an Athenian

pervverting people in Galilee, he would have told him about Jesus," said Angela with calm assurance.

"But you are not St. Peter," he said, rasped by her irreverence; and the girl answered quickly—

"No, but I am trying to do the Lord's work, as he did."

"Are you not trusting too much to your own power of argument?" he asked.

"I am not trusting to it at all. I am trusting entirely to God. If I had studied debating and these works of philosophy, I should be trusting to myself perhaps. Possibly that was the secret of your failure to affect Lyne when the Squire gave you an opportunity. I must be going now, or I shall not get through the rest of my work."

She turned towards the door as she spoke, and, exasperated by his powerlessness to affect her mind or turn her one hair's-breadth from her path, the Canon seized her arm.

"Angela, you must not go to that man. It is not right. It is presumptuous. I forbid you."

His breath was hot on her face, and she tried to draw away from him, but he held her tightly, clutching both wrists with his gaunt hands.

She made no further attempt to free herself, but raised her eyes coldly to his flushed ones.

"Canon Presyllett, you forget yourself. What right have you to touch me?"

His powerlessness to pose in her eyes as a religious guide had taken away all his pride and restraint, and he held her more tightly, his face flushed with passion.

"You are my wife. I can do anything I like with you."

"I am your wife in the eyes of the world," she said quietly, although her heart was beating quickly with fear. "Release my hands or I shall return to Lilac Lodge, and cease to be even that."

Her threat cowed him as well as the scorn in her voice. He dropped his hands.

"Forgive me. I am not myself to-day," he said huskily. "But it is wrong for you to think of going to that man's house—wrong in God's eyes."

She did not answer. The very mention of the Divine

name from his lips seemed profane to her after his exhibition of brutal temper. He had paced the length of the room in his disquietude, and when he turned, afraid to meet her eyes, she was gone—gone on her noble mission to the Windlehurst Infidel with a sickening sense of repulsion in her mind against the man with whom she had passed through the ceremony of marriage.

## CHAPTER XVI

THE poor Canon did not know why his wife's arguments always exasperated him, why they always robbed him of his persuasive power of debate, and left him with no weapon but the blunt dictation which she conscientiously ignored. He was sure that she was wrong in this case, and he knew that he could not persuade her that she was wrong, because she accepted no proof that was not based on the transcendental ethics which he claimed to believe. By those ethics, in their simplest form, he was always bound to agree with her, however ill advised she appeared from a practical standpoint. The practical standpoint she despised.

"Jesus never paused to consider what people would think, or whether He would endanger His social position," she would answer loftily in answer to his casuistries, and a galling sense of apparent religious inferiority would generally end in making the ecclesiastic lose his temper.

Unknown to himself, the sting of her opposition lay in the fact that it forced him at every point to admit that he possessed two creeds—one an heroic one which he claimed publicly as his sole belief, and the other a practical one by which he ruled nine-tenths of his actions. It is possible to retain the two quite comfortably, as every conventional Christian does, so long as we have only our own minds to satisfy with casuistries when the inconsistency of the two creeds becomes apparent. The Canon had had little difficulty in reconciling his conscience to the reading of Christ's words in church, "And if any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also;" while he carried, from court to court, a little law case he had been involved in, and lost, over a piece of land, or prosecuted



a little boy for stealing apples from his orchard. He asked no authority when he urged the prosecution of some unhappy "Peculiar People" in the village, who had let their child die for want of medical attendance, in direct obedience to a biblical command.

But Angela wanted authority for everything, and would take none except the example or command of Christ, at which the poor Canon could often only arrive by a very circuitous route indeed. To convince her was quite a different matter from satisfying his own conscience; and after finding on the wedding day that he was dumb while he remained on the lofty platform of pure Christian ethics with her, and she deaf when he climbed down to the lowly standpoint of practicability, he had ceased to argue, and contented himself with praying that God would give her a humble enough spirit to take his decisions as a wife should without question.

He had resigned himself to her opposition, as she had resigned herself to his, as a thorn in the flesh which had to be borne patiently for God's sake, and had actually confessed to God what he could not stoop to confess to his wife—some contrition for the fits of irritability into which it had driven him. He was still looking upon her subjectively as an influence on his soul. The girl's soul, and his relation to it, did not enter into his thoughts. He looked forward to a change in her which would lessen the friction between them and save him from annoyance. It never remotely suggested itself to him that the friction might be removed by a change in himself. He had through his long celibacy justified every one of his actions to himself before God, until it would have become almost an opposition to God to change them. To do so out of thoughtfulness for his wife's happiness would have been to distract his thoughts from a lofty ideal, and place before himself that lowlier standard of conduct which, together with its impurity, helped to make ordinary marriage a snare for the earnest seeker after holiness.

The marriage had turned out, of course, very very differently from what he had expected. His surprise in Angela's character after the ceremony had been fully as great as her

surprise in his. Throughout his clerical career he had been consistently treated by all the ladies with whom he had been brought in contact with a mixture of awe and admiration, and Angela's attitude before the marriage had done nothing to make him expect different treatment from her. She had listened to him as an oracle, and spoken with bated breath of the position he offered her. He had naturally thought that she would always be a worshipper, listening to him as the representative of God in lowly humility; and on the very first day of their spiritual partnership she had lectured him on his faults, criticised his commands, and openly refused to obey them, because they did not seem to her feminine conscience the commands of God. It was an overwhelming shock to him. It jostled roughly his almost mediæval idea of women, according to which it was a sin against religion for a wife to express an opinion in opposition to her husband. The realisation of her sinfulness in doing so prevented his feeling the sting of her criticisms. He was so shocked by them that he never paused to wonder whether they were true ones.

Her refusal to accept his decisions placed the marriage in a new light considered as a feat of purity, the view of it which had particularly appealed to him. He had looked upon women as little more than vehicles of passion, temptations to sin, in the same category with tasty dishes and champagne; and Angela was certainly a temptation to him. Her physical beauty inflamed him even while she was opposing him, and prevented his regretting the marriage for a moment in spite of her independence. But her independence took away all credit that he might have claimed for his purity. Her will was a factor in the case which he had not taken into consideration. In all his thoughts before marriage he had thought of her as an instrument perfectly pliant in his hand for good or evil. In his pleasant conception he had been imagining her, with less purity than his own, waiting for him to dismiss with a word the restriction they had voluntarily placed upon their union, watching the struggle between the Angel and the Beast, with some human partisanship for the latter.

Her rejection of his authority, and her scarcely veiled hostility to him personally, had altered all that. The Angel and the Beast might struggle as much as they liked, but the decision would rest with Angela, and the Canon realised very clearly what her decision would be. She had already evidenced her determination to maintain the merely nominal nature of their contract with a stringency even greater than that which he had purposed to himself. Accustomed as he was to snatching for himself any small gratification that could be justified by his circular method of casuistry, he had looked forward to kissing her, as in the vestry, when a public exhibition of tenderness was necessary to preserve the world's view of their union. The kiss had shocked her, and she had absolutely forbidden any future public deception of the character. When he took her hand she shrank away from his touch as from something unholy, and never by any means did he catch a glimpse of her in the slightest *deshabille*.

The realisation galled him inexpressibly. There was nothing for which he struggled harder than for moral isolation, the making of every moral question an issue between himself and God. It was the keynote of his character, as it was of his wife's, and furnished the motive-power of their abnegation. They bowed to the control of God, as they imagined God, for the pleasure of ignoring every other interference with their actions. This attitude, as we have seen, showed itself even in such small matters as the Canon's irritability towards his cold breakfast. He had settled with God and his conscience the exact amount of physical gratification he could give himself, and resented every outside influence which his conscience had not taken into consideration in the debate, but which altered the result.

The whole attraction of his marriage, apart from the assistance it would give him in gaining the Kensington living, had lain in the fact that it would assist in the moral isolation he loved and craved for. It would make his purity a matter between himself and the Almighty, and free it from any social restraint. He had never been alone with his conscience before in the matter. There had always

been the galling consciousness that, with his conscience out of the question, he had society and his parish to reckon with. Only the profoundest secrecy with regard to his occasional lapses from purity had enabled him to settle accounts afterwards with his Maker alone; to say, "I have sinned, I have repented, I have laid my sin on Christ. I am once more perfectly holy, and friends with the Deity I have offended." His peace when he had done this had for ever been marred by the fear that he might be brought to another tribunal; that the knowledge of his sin would leak out, and subject him to the criticism of the world, which would laugh at his holiness, dub him a mere filthy hypocrite, and possibly hound him out of his living.

It is a very disturbing after-thought for a man who has made peace with God and his conscience, and the poor Canon had hoped that his marriage would save him effectually from its recurrence.

"Now, if he fell," he had told himself, "the galling interference of society was provided against, and there would be no disturbing voice to interfere awkwardly in his direct relationship to the Deity."

This was the grand consideration which had made him urge the marriage with enthusiasm, when once he had persuaded himself that he had received Divine sanction for it; and it was possibly the unadmitted anticipation of falling which threw a glow over the presence of Angela in his house, even after her opposition and her quite startling want of personal admiration for him had made it seem so different from what he had fondly imagined.

Her coldness increased his passion and lessened his self-restraint, for his impatience of outside interferences with the dictates of God or Devil in him was bound up with his creed; and the attitude of his wife, which robbed God and Devil of free play, became an offence against his soul. Any endearment with which he might hope to break down her unanticipated coldness became in his eyes justified by the result it might have in leaving him face to face once more with the Almighty.

But again the justification was empty, for Angela would

not allow the least endearment, and his realisation of the slender tie which bound them together, and which she might break at any moment, prevented his venturing anything in opposition to her will.

The position was an unbearable one, leaving him without either gratification or credit, and the ascetic had locked himself in his study to lay the whole matter before God, while his wife was lecturing the school children and deciding that her duty called her to the conversion of Gabriel Lyne. She always thought of him as Lyne, or Gabriel Lyne, partly because the Canon never gave him a prefix, partly because the fact of his infidelity placed him in her mind on a low social level with the drunken cobbler and butcher. While she had been advising the village girls to keep a little note-book for the private record of their sins, her husband had been stretched before the martyred bishop's praying-stool begging that she might be set free from certain sins of rebellion against authority and obstinate contumacy which never appeared in the young wife's own note-book, although she kept one.

The Rector prayed very fervently that his wife might be made all that he wanted her to be—docile, obedient, and humble; and his prayer was really so genuine, that it did not satisfy him. If he had been petitioning for strength against a pleasant temptation, he would have left the request contentedly with Divinity; but his whole nature called for dominion over the woman to whom he had given his name, and he rose from his knees to pace the floor, puzzling over the best practical means of gaining it.

His perfect powerlessness was galling to think of. If he appealed to his authority as a husband, Angela reminded him of the words he had spoken only to gain his point before the marriage—that he was not her husband in the eyes of God. If he claimed the right to her obedience as to the minister of Christ, she was quick to show him that he was using that claim for the furtherance of his personal wishes, and that it ceased as such to affect her. When he defended himself from the imputation, their creeds clashed, and her purely heroic one triumphed over his double-creed

with its unadmitted worship of convenience, custom, and conventionality side by side with its worship of Christ.

Other men could appeal to their wife's affection, and the Canon was beginning to realise how great a part earthly love plays in the mental union of husband and wife. In a strangely perverted way he began for the first time to see something of the divine use of passion, and he was ready to admit that though it would be a sin for him to love his wife, still it would be in the interests of God if his wife loved him.

Deep in his heart of hearts he had expected her to do so. From the moment when she first called upon him he had imagined himself exerting over her the same personal charm which he seemed to exert over all the elderly unmarried ladies of Windlehurst. Their unfailing admiration had filled him with a superb personal vanity, unconscious because of its completeness; and the idea of any religiously minded woman considering him with either apathy or dislike had not occurred to him as within the reach of possibility. He would not admit to himself that it was possible now. Angela's growing antipathy against him, which she could not help showing, must be the antipathy which he himself felt towards champagne: he dreaded and shrank from it because he loved it.

As he was striding backwards and forwards across the dimly lighted mediæval room, he heard the postman come to the front door, and, hungry as he was for the divine help of coincidences, hurried to the letter-box to see what he had brought.

It was another letter from Lord Winlay, informing him with many regrets that his friend who had the gift of St. Catherine's had ignored his suggestion of the Canon, and had given the living to a relation of his own, a young unmarried man just fresh from his ordination.

"I hope to goodness," the worldly aristocrat had written in his usual half-joking strain, "that you did not marry your new wife on the chance of gaining the living. If so, it is rather awkward, old man. It is so much more difficult to get rid of a wife than to gain one; and the only living which

I have the least interest in now is pretty sure to be given to a celibate when it falls vacant. The congregation and the owner of the living are highly ritualistic."

Canon Presyllett crushed the paper in his hand. He had been counting on this reward of his marriage as a certainty, and it left him with his action unjustified completely unless it could be made the feat of purity which he had meditated.

He fell on his knees again, and the thoughts which had coursed through his mind as he walked at the bidding of self-love of passion and vanity began to bear fruit in forming a message from Divinity.

His wife's want of docility was a sin against Heaven. He had no doubt about that. The idea of woman's subordination to man, crusted with antiquity, cannot well lack authority from a creed which has always been officially enunciated by males, and in the Canon's mind it was one of those ideas which lay too deep for question. Angela's contumacy was a sin; he must do what he could, therefore, to prevent it; and the only plan which seemed to him to promise a successful result was that of rousing or increasing her passion for himself. Only by so doing could he make his purity of account in God's eyes. His duty was surely plain. God had spoken.

He rose from his knees with a new purpose—the purpose which had softened his voice and sweetened his manner when Angela entered the room on her return from the schools. It was a different face with which he watched her go—that of a man baffled and exasperated.

## CHAPTER XVII

JUST beyond the church at Windlehurst, a decaying finger-post, dumb with age, pointed mutely down a lane which branched off at right angles from the highroad to Barnwood. To-day the obliterated board was the finger of Destiny, for as Angela passed it, it was pointing to the cottage of Gabriel Lyne. The lane was a little-used one, and the Rector's wife was on fresh ground when she found herself between its tall bramble-covered hedges. For "The Barn," as Gabriel had nicknamed his home, was the only habitation along it nearer than the village of Hartle, to which it led. The lane was a very beautiful one, creeping under arched sunlight-slatted trees, down a steep decline to the river, which it crossed by means of an old-fashioned wooden bridge, to climb again with undulating weakness of purpose and many a twisting curve up the hills. Of its goal three or four miles away could be caught glimpses here and there between the trees on the left, in the shape of the Hartle Church spire and half-a-dozen patches of red roof peeping through the nest of green, from which the grey pinnacle seemed to take its rise.

But Angela had little thought to give to the beauty of her walk. She was a new David advancing to the overthrow of a modern Goliath. The simile had suggested itself to her own mind, and justified to her more than ever her opposition to her husband. He had warned her to put on the armour of philosophical learning, but, like David, she was going forth in simple dependence on the help of God and the knowledge that her cause was His. She carried her pebbles in a sling-like string bag. They consisted of her Testament and two tracts which she had selected carefully



as most likely to strike conviction into the heart of an unbeliever. They were entitled: "Thou God seest me," and "Sinner, what about Death?" In her other hand was a bunch of flowers, with which she hoped to soften the heart of the Infidel, and from which she could lead his thoughts to their Maker.

She felt fully armed for the battle, and walked with elastic step, full of zeal to meet God's enemies.

But she was not prepared to meet a bull. Against that terrible creature she had not even the protection of a parasol, and when the sound of pattering steps behind her broke in upon her enthusiastic thoughts, and glancing over her shoulder she saw a red steer with wild eyes and sweating hide advancing upon her at a run, her cheek paled, and she thought only of flight.

It is quite certain that if the need had arisen she would have suffered at the stake, or allowed herself to be devoured by wild beasts in the arena for a question of her belief, and would have borne her martyrdom nobly; but before this sudden commonplace danger all her courage deserted her, and she tore along the road in excited terror, the poor beast following at a jaded but steady trot. Her cheeks grew paler and paler as she realised that the tall thick hedge on either side offered her no loophole of escape. But suddenly to her despairing eye appeared a gate, and she uttered an exclamation of gratitude. God had sent her a gate.

But her gratitude was premature. Man had put a strong padlock on it, and she tugged at it in vain. She was in despair, and had no energy to continue her flight or even to try and climb the gate, which was a high one.

It is the locked gates of life which have always produced prayer, and in her hopelessness Angela found her Christian fortitude come back. If it was God's will, she must die, but it was very hard for her to realise that it could be. Such a death seemed so miserably useless and unheroic. The pattering feet were close now.

"O Jesu, help me," she said aloud; and as she spoke, like a divine answer came an athletic figure, vaulting over the gate with one hand.

Angela had buried her face in her hands. When she looked up, the stranger she had met at Barnwood was standing in the path of the runaway steer, which had stopped dead.

"Poor thing, I do not think it would have hurt you, Mrs. Presyllett," he said, taking off his hat and turning towards her as carelessly as if the terrible red creature was not staring at him with its wild eyes and bellowing.

He saw the look of apprehension in her face, and a smile flashed into his eyes as he took up his position between the girl and her dreaded enemy.

"You are afraid of cattle," he said. "I don't think you need be. They are almost always more afraid of us than we are of them. If you had waved your arms it would have gone back. See."

He turned it back with a cattle-drover's "Shoo!" and as it walked slowly away, Angela felt a sense of shame seize her at her cowardice.

The last time that she had met this man she had claimed to fear nothing except neglect of duty, and here he had found her panic-stricken by mere thoughts of her personal safety. He even seemed to deny that her danger had been a serious one, and she hastened to show that it was.

"A man was gored by a bull only last week at Captain Benson's farm," she said. "I went to speak to his poor widow and children yesterday. I am very grateful for your assistance, and grateful to God who sent you. I felt that He would not desert me in my danger, and He sent you."

Her piety jarred on him. For a moment, in her fear and her reliance on his protection, she had been so sweetly and beautifully human, and now this set expression was coming back to her face, which struggled with its beauty as her prim dress struggled with her grace of form. The bull dispelled it.

It had turned back to pursue its runaway course, now that the young man's attention seemed diverted to the figure by the gate.

"Oh! it is coming again," cried Angela, still unable to restrain a tremor in her voice. "Please drive it away."

"I am afraid that I shall have to drive it back to the church," he said, advancing into the road.

"Oh! I do not think I shall be afraid if it is once past the hill," she said, sorry to think of him taking so much trouble on her behalf.

Gabriel smiled again. There was a subtle enjoyment to him in showing this perfect woman that she was not perfect.

"I am afraid I was only thinking of the poor beast. Have you not noticed how distressed it is? It must have run away from some drove, I should think, passing the end of the lane, and is feeling hopelessly lost."

There was a real sympathy for the animal in his voice which appealed to her.

"I am afraid that I am very selfish," she said. "I was thinking only of myself."

Her humility was perfectly genuine, and made him feel sorry that he had convinced her of the failing. But the ready reliance she placed on his words made him fear to continue the conversation. Besides, there was the beast.

"It was only natural," he said, taking his hat off again; "but I must be thinking of the poor drover at the other end, who is no doubt anxiously wondering where our runaway friend has gone to. Good-bye."

He started at once driving the steer before him, and she had to call out to him the thanks which she felt she had forgotten to speak before.

He was turning his head to reply when he stumbled over her bag, which she had dropped in her flight, and he stopped to pick it up. One of the tracts, "Sinner, what about Death?" had fallen out, and he glanced at the title while picking it up to return to her.

She held out her hand when she had taken it from him.

"Thank you very much for helping me. I do not know what I should have done if you had not come."

Gabriel laughed.

"You would have stood still by the gate, and when you looked up would have found the steer had passed, wondering no doubt what you were standing there for. I am glad if I have been of service to you. Good-bye."

He seemed to her anxious to get away. She would have liked to ask his name.

It was not till she was in sight of "The Barn" that her thoughts returned to Gabriel Lyne the infidel, whom she was about to try and convert with the help of a bunch of flowers and two denunciatory tracts—Gabriel Lyne, who would meet her probably with foul abuse, like the infidel in the village.

As seen from the road the Infidel's cottage had little about it to render its title inappropriate, or to explain its attraction to a man of Gabriel Lyne's temperament and tastes. The tall dull red brick wall which enclosed the garden formed the house front by rising a little higher and indenting itself with a whitewashed porch and a couple of tiny windows close under the tiled roof. There was nothing to divide it from the road, and a jealous Highway Board had plucked up the creepers with which the author had hoped to cover its nakedness because their roots had perforce to be planted on the public path.

The place had to Angela a God-forsaken appearance which fitted it for the occupation of the desperado she was expecting to meet, and she knocked timidly, feeling now a need of all her fortitude. The place was more isolated than she had expected, and a natural womanly fear made her heart beat a little more quickly than usual. But worldly fear was unworthy of a servant of Christ, and she struggled to repress it.

It was a relief to her to find her knock answered by a neatly dressed old woman, who held the door but slightly ajar while she waited for the unusual visitor to state her errand.

Angela detected a slight surprise on her face when she asked for Mr. Lyne.

She explained that he was out, had gone for a swim, but might be expected back at any moment.

"Perhaps you will meet him if you go a little way along the road," she said; for honest Mrs. Marlow had her ideas of propriety if she was housekeeper to an infidel, and a young lady is a young lady even if she does wear a Quaker-like bonnet and the cloak of a nurse.

There was no mistaking the surprise on her face when the young lady answered in her calm voice that she would like to come in and wait for Mr. Lyne. She would have more chance of a quiet talk with the desperado if he found her already installed in his citadel, she thought; and she rather enjoyed the old woman's wonder. It reminded her how superior she was to the rules of conduct which her aunts, for instance, made a religion of. She recognised no rules but those which came from Christ, and she did not realise that half her courage was due to the presence of the old housekeeper herself and the respectability which showed itself in her attitude.

As Mrs. Marlow opened the door wider, not without a show of hesitation, Angela was struck by the first of the surprises which the house had to offer her. The hall was a wide one, and opened out beyond, through a jewel-like Indian curtain of whipcord and beads, into a luxuriously carpeted room full of sunlight, with French windows opening on an extensive lawn. The girl's glance could travel straight through and drink in a sense of sunlight and green freshness, tinged with orientalism by the bead curtain, the Benares hanging lamp, and the Japanese and Indian nicknacks on the walls. Gabriel Lyne had a passion for ferns and Indian work, and it evidenced itself everywhere. The hall table was exquisitely carved teak, and supported a palm fern in a huge Satsuma vase, which blended too well with the general effect of the place to let one think of its costliness.

Two palm ferns like sentinels guarded the foot of the broad staircase, with its old-fashioned low balustrade squarely built and painted white.

Nothing could be a greater contrast than the effect which the whole presented to the barn-like exterior of the house.

It dawned upon poor Angela for the first time that an infidel could be a man of taste. When the old housekeeper ushered her into a long low room on the right, looking out at the end into the delicious old-fashioned garden, it impressed itself upon her that he might also be a man of education; for one side of the wall was lined with books, and a desk in the window was covered with sheets of manuscript.

The room was a plainly furnished one, and was free from orientalism, but there was an air of old-fashioned cosiness about it which contrasted with the grim austerity of the living-rooms at the Rectory. A great oak beam running across the ceiling helped in its air of homeliness, and although the weather was still far from cold, a fire had been lighted in the wide old-fashioned grate.

But the pleasantness of the room did not place Angela at her ease. She would have been much more content to find it as squalid as the cottage of the drunken cobbler. The first thing she noticed when the neatly dressed old woman had closed the door behind her was a crowded jar of late roses standing on the open desk, which made her almost as ashamed of her own nosegay as the little Tomtits had been of theirs when they paid their visit to the Rectory.

The books discomfited her more, as she walked along the side of the room glancing at their titles. Most of them were unknown to her, but those she knew startled her. Farrar's "Life of Christ," Paley's "Evidences of Christianity," which she had heard of and accepted as an unanswerable reply to those who attacked her belief, but which she had not read, even her favourite Thomas à Kempis, were among the learned-looking books on the Infidel's shelves. Angela felt in spite of herself a certain distrust, and something that was almost contempt, for her tracts. If the enemy had read all these devout works, how could "Sinner, what about Death?" possibly move him. But surely he could not have read them.

As the doubt entered her mind she caught sight of an open book lying on his desk, and she crossed the room to see what it was that he had been actually reading. It was a well-worn Bible.

Angela stood staring at it quite aghast. But the example of David came back to comfort her. Her Goliath had wrapped himself in the armour of learning, but she was not counting on worldly weapons. However much he had hardened his heart against divine truth by worldly efforts of intellect, God would show her his weak point, and make his armour of no avail.

She had been counting on her own strength after all, and it was well that she should realise how little it was, and place all her reliance on the Giver of all strength.

She closed her eyes in prayer as she stood, and felt her courage return with it.

Her conception of the enemy was changing rapidly, and her mind was unconsciously building up a new one with fresh traits to give it the necessary unpleasantness. The drunken cobbler was abandoned as a framework, and in his place her mind adopted some shadowy distorted reflection of John Stuart Mill, mingled with that of Rousseau, Voltaire, and the Devil of "Paradise Lost." She imagined a cold, inhuman, but scholarly face, full of selfishness and pride, indexing a mind which gloried in its intellectual attainments alone, and which held no place for tenderness towards others or care for human welfare. But it was an essential part of her conception still that the Infidel was conscious of his sin, that he was voluntarily defying the God whom he denied with his lips, but whom he feared and believed in while he defied Him.

She was attributing to him all the motives which would be needed in herself to assume a position like his. This is how we form all our judgments, making our own conscience unconsciously the standard conscience of humanity. It is the undeniable fact that human consciences differ, which makes all human judgments absurd, and which enables us, by the way, to take literally the Christ-uttered command, "Judge not."

But Angela had never thought seriously about the text. There are so many of them, that we can choose those which please us, and which agree with the idea of duty that our natures formulate; and the girl's mind was dwelling just now on a command to go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in.

Her duty was to compel Gabriel Lyne to come into her own way of thinking, and, in her reliance on divine strength, she was rather pleased than otherwise now to realise that she had not a single plan in her head as to how she should compel him.

God would give her a plan.

He began to do so while she stood by the desk in the half-open window, through which the scent of wallflowers came, wafted in from the sunny garden. The sunlight crept in sideways and fell across her slender clasped hands, gleaming on the new band of gold round one finger. Her face was turned upwards, as if her devout eyes could pierce through the low ceiling and see the Spirit with whom her soul held communion.

"Death!" said the Spirit, "that is the point on which you will conquer. Ask the unbeliever how he will dare to die. Remind him that at any moment his rebellious soul may be called to its account, where no specious reasoning will avail it."

Her mind became more composed, and the array of books ceased to alarm her. As she imagined the timid atheist trembling at every little danger that remotely threatened to hurry him unprepared into the presence of an offended Almighty, her own contrasting fearlessness exaggerated itself in her mind, and she drew herself erect, with an expression of exalted calm on her beautiful face.

The outer door was heard opening. Goliath had come, but she was prepared to meet him. Her heart beat a little quicker as she heard the knob turned, but her face was devoutly set, and she showed no outward sign of nervousness.

Then the door opened, and the devout air melted into a smile of surprise and pleasure. For the man who entered was not the dreaded infidel at all, but the man who in two short meetings had won so much of her regard, and filled her with a trust in his nobility of heart due more to his bearing than to his actual words.

The pleased surprise in her face was magnified in that of Gabriel Lyne. He had met the owner of the steer at the top of the hill, with eyes as excited and hide as sweating as his beast's, and had walked back slowly home, thinking of the girl he had met, and struggling against the fascination which her apparent outshining honesty and single-mindedness as much as her beauty exercised over him. If it had simply been that she was beautiful, he could have reconciled himself



to the fact that her beauty was not for him, as easily as he reconciled himself to the fact that many other pleasant things were unattainable.

It was more the thought of her loss than of his own which made him revolt against the idea of her belonging to a man like Canon Presyllett. He could see her young enthusiastic nature becoming more and more narrow and warped, instead of expanding, as he knew that it would do so easily under his care, into that of a great-souled woman between whom and himself a perfect sympathy would be possible.

It was the pity of it that made him revolt against her possession by another man, but he did not deceive himself into thinking that the pity made his interest an impersonal and safe one. With a keen eye always set on his own motives, he realised that if it was pity which made him long for Angela Presyllett, it was her personal attractiveness which gave his pity its strength.

Quite candidly he admitted to himself that he was inclined to lust after another man's wife. The admission filled him with no shame. He had no infallible moral foot-rule by which to measure the guilt of the feeling. He had no object in deciding whether it was justifiable or the reverse. His only questions with regard to it were practical ones. Would it be advisable to check the feeling or to cultivate it; and if the former, what was the first step to be taken?

His logically-justified habit of following a principle rather than an impulse made his decision the matter of a moment, and he had jumped at the opportunity of driving back the runaway steer rather than continue a pleasant interview that was dangerous to him.

Now, as he came back, he flattered himself that his Nun would be well out of his way on her journey to Hartle; for the thought of her visiting "The Barn" had not once suggested itself to his mind. When Mrs. Gateacre had suggested that the Canon's wife might attempt his conversion, he had been reassured immediately by the consideration that her husband would unquestionably veto such a step, and the danger had passed completely out of his mind—too completely for him to find a connection between himself

and the "Sinner" of her tract which he had picked up in the road.

He had no doubt that she had been warned against him, and her friendly attitude at the gate only told him that she had not yet learnt to associate him with the redoubtable Infidel of Windlehurst.

"After listening to Presyllett, I expect she has been looking for something with cloven hoofs," he said to himself with a grim smile as he opened his own door and walked towards the room where he wrote, hoping that a good spell at his book would help him to obliterate from his mind the pretty picture of a frightened girl by a gate which at present filled it.

Then as he opened the door a pleased smile flashed involuntarily into his face.

"I had no idea that you were on your way to see me, or I should not have left you," he said apologetically; and Angela smiled.

"But I have not come to see you. I came to speak to Mr. Lyne, the Infidel." The house and the books had triumphed over the enemy's infidelity and gained him a prefix. "It seems that you know him," she added, thinking that, had she known, she might have left the conversion of the unbeliever in his hands. Her mind had invented quickly a plausible theory to account for her friend's at-homeness in the house. He must have decided to live with the Infidel for a time in order to influence him for God. It was a project which would have appealed to herself—had the Infidel been a woman. She admired him the more for it, and her whole manner spoke approval.

It was hard for him to speak the word that would turn her smile to condemnation. But her friendliness was dangerous, and he conquered an inclination to continue the conversation without disillusionising her.

"You are making a mistake about me, Mrs. Presyllett," he said in his pleasantly musical voice. "I ought to have introduced myself, when we first met, as Gabriel Lyne—the Infidel. Won't you sit down? You have come to reason with me about my wickedness, haven't you, and to read me a little tract called 'Sinner, what about Death?'"

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE brightness died away from Angela's face, as Gabriel had expected, but the incredulity which took its place left no place even for condemnation. It was difficult for her to believe her ears.

"*You* are Mr. Lyne? *You* an infidel?" she said slowly, searching into his face as if for some trace of the type she had conjured from her imagination.

"Why not?"

The girl's perfect bewilderment, and his appreciation of its cause, was beginning to make his amusement conquer every other emotion. There was a half-humorous smile in his eyes which rendered him less than ever the Mephistophelian personage she had imagined her Goliath to be. She thought that people must have maligned him, forgetting that all the faults she had expected to find in him had been evolved from her own conception of what an unbeliever must be.

"You seemed to me such a good man," she said with blunt honesty. "You seemed to take a real interest in the poor at Barnwood."

"Oh! I hope that there was no deception in that." His mouth curved pleasantly in his efforts to remain as solemn as his questioner. "I hope nobody has told you that I am a bad man. I always try to behave myself."

"But you call yourself an infidel."

"Why not, if I am one? But won't you sit down, Mrs. Presyllett?"

She had remained quite motionless from the moment of his revelation, which startled her more than he had expected. He was unaware, of course, of the degree to which she had been idealising him, although the other side of the contrast,

which made his revelation a thunderbolt, was clear to him. He had grown accustomed to people looking for his cloven hoofs, and taking for granted that with Christianity he had thrown off the civilisation which is roughly classed with it, and which to the majority of professed Christians forms their only practical conception of the religion. She sat down mechanically now in the chair he offered her, and he took up his position by the fireplace, where he stood, with one arm on the mantelshelf, looking down at her quizzically.

Her attempt to convert him was inevitable, he told himself, and the best thing was to get it over, and ended in some definite manner which would prevent her taking any further interest in his soul. Not that there was much fear of their friendship ripening now.

Angela was still dazed and helpless after her discovery, which made her feel, in spite of herself, that there was something presumptuous in what she had come to do. She tried to concentrate her mind for a moment on God, seeking help from Him.

"Well! won't you read me the tract? I will promise to listen?" asked Gabriel, as she remained silent. "I can just give you ten minutes, and then I must get on with my work. The sunshine lured me away from it this morning for a swim, to which fact I owed the pleasure of reassuring you in your little encounter with the bull. By the way, I met the drover in a great state of mind about it. The poor beast had been running for miles."

It made it very hard for her to remember her spiritual superiority when his words reminded her so vividly of the scene in the lane, where she had shown a worldly fear, which contrasted with his perfect unconcern. How could she tell him now that face to face with death all infidels must necessarily be cowards, and only Christians were brave? She remembered that he had shown an equal *sang froid* in the fever-stricken house. Although he had admitted that he entered it in ignorance, still after his discovery he appeared to have chatted with the doctor who had just attended the patients, and to have left the place only after ascertaining that the poor people's welfare was provided for.

If she could have imagined any motive for his infidelity, any sin or selfishness which he struggled to maintain by a denial of his duty to God, she would have felt strong and denounced it; but he had impressed her with a sense of his unselfishness and nobility, and she found herself with no emotion but a weak bewilderment.

"I don't understand how you can help being a Christian," she said, with nothing but inquiry in her voice. "What is it that keeps you from giving your heart to Jesus? Is it not pride of intellect?"

She glanced at the big array of books as she spoke.

"Oh! I don't think so," said Gabriel cheerfully. "It is not respect for books, if that is what you mean. I find myself disagreeing with them all—Buddhist, Mohammedan, and Rationalist as well as Christian. I simply don't believe in orthodox Christianity because I don't believe it. It is no good pretending that I do, is it, when it does not seem to me true or religious?"

"Religious!" Angela opened her eyes. "But Christianity is religion."

"Oh no, it is not," said Gabriel, carried away by the argument in spite of himself. "Religion is a relationship between man and the Creator. It is true or false according as it is founded on a true or false conception of the Creator; and I call Christianity false, and opposed to a truer religion, because it seems to me to be founded on a wrong conception of the Creator altogether, and to fail us as a working motive for conduct in consequence."

He spoke rapidly, anxious to justify himself by showing that he was driven into his position by a deeper concern for religion than her own, and still anxious for her sake that his arguments should not interfere with her own faith. Now it suddenly occurred to him that unless he wished to set her thinking, his talking at all was absurd, and he broke off abruptly.

"But it is of no use our arguing about it. You honestly think that Christianity is the true religion. I think with equal honesty that it is a comparatively false one. All the talking in the world won't make it truer or falsier, will it?"

If I persuade you or you persuade me, the matter remains the same. Don't you think that we had better each be content with what we believe to be true? By the way, I wanted to talk to you about that house at Barnwood. I hear that your husband has sold it to the worst rack-renter in the place."

But Angela was not to be led from the subject. His eagerness to dismiss it seemed to her the first sign that he had shown of weakness, and gave her encouragement. To her the matter was not one that could possibly be dismissed. The stake for her was different from the stake for him. Gabriel could see as the goal of his success only a woman placed in a very uncomfortable position with regard to her surroundings, but to Angela success promised her the salvation of a soul poised on the brink of an eternity of torment. How could she treat the argument as a matter of small importance?

In her earnestness she rose impulsively and laid her hand on his arm.

"But have you no fear of offending God? Have you ever realised what a terrible thing it is to neglect the salvation which Christ offers you? Suppose that you are wrong. Just suppose it, and think what it will be to be lost eternally through faith in your own reason."

He dropped his arm almost rudely, and drew back from her.

"My dear young lady, does it occur to you as likely that I have omitted to consider the most important considerations of the creed you profess?"

"But have you prayed to God to assist you in your thoughts?" she asked earnestly. "Have you asked Him for guidance, or have you trusted blindly to your own feeble intellect? Will you not let me pray with you now, that your eyes may be opened, and that you may see the vital importance of the salvation Christ offers you?"

"Would not that be rather like taking it for granted that you are right and that I am wrong?" he asked, his matter-of-fact voice contrasting strangely with her emotional earnestness. "As it happens, I think with my whole heart that you are wrong and I right. Of course I am acquainted with

your arguments," he went on, as she was about to interrupt him. "If you thought, when you came here, that I knew nothing about your creed, it was really very kind of you to come and tell me something about it; but when I tell you that I have been a Christian as ardent as yourself, and have seen something which appears to me honestly to be truer and more religious, you will see that your action was unnecessary. It does not make Christianity any the truer, does it, because you have been taught it and happen to approve of it? I have read all those books about every side of Christianity by those who accept it,"—he waved his hand towards the bookshelf,—“and, what is much more, I have lived as a Christian, and made a sincere effort to adjust all my actions to Christian ethics and beliefs. Now, if you think that you have seen something in Christianity which I have not noticed, you may alter my views by showing it to me; but if you are repeating just what you have been taught—well! you are only telling me what I have grown tired of hearing, and the fact that you repeat it does not make it any truer or more convincing. Argument between us is an uneven fight, which for your sake I should like to save you. Perhaps I sound conceited in talking like this, but that is how the argument appeals to me.”

He spoke in a sharp, dictatorial tone, with the idea of ending the discussion and effectually preventing its revival at any future time; and Angela, who was more affected by a show of authority than by logical claims to it, felt in spite of herself like a school-girl who had done wrong. It was a feeling against which she struggled fiercely, for the sensation was traitorous to her creed; but the effort was not a successful one, and there was a touch of school-girl petulance in her tone when she answered—

“If you really think that your ideas are truer than mine, you ought to try and convince me.”

She was telling herself still, in spite of his words, that his creed, if he would but enunciate it, would be sure to have flaws of reasoning which she could detect at once. But another thought had also entered her mind to help in the prompting of her retort. It was beginning to occur to her

conscience for the first time that there might be views of Christianity and religion different from her own, which she ought to examine and decide upon before being so certain that she had found final and infallible truth. The one new truth which had impressed her was gained from his manner, his personality, rather than from any verbal defence he had made for his attitude—the truth that religious opinions opposed to her own might be held just as honestly and conscientiously as she held hers. She had met with opposition to her views many a time, but it had always been the opposition of will, not of conviction. Even the drunken cobbler, while he abused her God, admitted tacitly by his manner, by his very virulence, that she was really in the right. How could he do otherwise when she had order, virtue, and respectability on her side, and he was fighting for his own way alone? Just as the moral standpoint of a country is upheld more by those who fail to uphold it in practice but feel shame for their failure, than by those who do not fail, so every established religion owes its chief strength to those who have neither the moral enthusiasm to live by its ethics, or to question the generally accepted opinion that they ought to do so. It is this inert backboneless mass which gives Christianity its strength as a party, and which had furnished to Angela her only idea of non-Christians. Gabriel Lyne had presented her with a new type—a man with moral enthusiasm enough to live by Christian ethics, who honestly thought them unsatisfactory. She could not doubt his honesty. His whole bearing made the attempt impossible. There seemed nothing to account for the difference between their beliefs except honest thought on his part; and her heart cried out to know what his thoughts were, so that she might find them faulty, and justify her position to herself once more. If she could have looked into her own heart, she would have seen that the desire with which she had come to “The Barn,” to teach Gabriel truth, had been driven into the background by a desire to justify herself for calling it truth. The change was a rapid one; but, after all, it is the facts of the universe, and not the arguments of men, which mould our opinions, and poor Mrs. Presyllett was face to face with a new fact.



## CHAPTER XIX

"If you really think that your ideas are truer than mine, you ought to try and convince me," said Mrs. Presyllett, seating herself again in the chair Gabriel had given her, and trying hard to feel brave and confident.

But all real confidence was on the man's side, and the knowledge of his strength made him afraid to use it. There was a personal temptation in her appeal or challenge, whichever it was, and he steeled himself against it, falling back again on his sense of humour for support.

"Now, you wish me to admit that your own methods of spreading truth are the only right ones, Mrs. Presyllett," he said, looking down with his quizzical smile. "If you are right you must invade my house, if I am right I must invade yours, eh? Luckily my creed enables me to see something of divinity in human impulses and conventions, as you cannot, and I can accept it as a divine duty that I ought sometimes to mind my own business. I am really not blaming you for coming here," he added quickly, as her face flushed scarlet. "I have enjoyed talking to you, and I admire the conscientiousness with which you obey your creed. If I had any blame, it would only be for the creed which absolutely forbids you to mind your own business. My creed is different, and my business is the making of books."

He glanced towards the manuscript on his desk meaningly. The ten minutes he had promised her were more than gone, and her deliciously human blush had made him more anxious than ever to end the interview. Already it promised to give him weeks of working and digging in order to master the revolt in him against her marriage to the gaunt ascetic.

Angela rose unwillingly.

"I do not wish to interrupt you any longer," she said. "Perhaps it was wrong of me to take up so much of your time. I thought that you were quite different." She spoke awkwardly, twisting her hands together nervously. "But I should like very much to hear more of your views. I cannot help thinking that there must be some terrible flaw in them to prevent your calling yourself a Christian. Perhaps you will let me come again when you are not so busy."

"So that my views may have the benefit of your criticism?"

"No, it is not that——" Angela flushed again, and laced her slender ungloved fingers more nervously than ever.

He saved her the effort of saying what her object was, by going on, his voice toning down the bluntness of his refusal.

"I am afraid that I shall not have time. If you want to convert me, I am sure that it is impossible. My views have grown from yours, and may grow to something else, but nothing can grow back again."

"And suppose I wish to learn?"

The question took some asking, and was worded even before she had definitely decided to herself whether it was more than an experimental hypothesis to see what he would answer.

She had grown to consider her soul of such account in the world, that she expected him to jump at the slightest hope of converting her to his views, and his answer chilled her.

"I am afraid that I still have not time to teach you, Mrs. Presyllett. My publisher tells me that there are at least ten thousand people waiting for the expression of my views. I am writing another book against orthodox Christianity, you know. And while I am speaking to you, I might be speaking to the ten thousand, and earning my own living at the same time. I am eager to spread what I believe to be truth, but the fact does not make me unpractical. I do not hold that it is religious to be unpractical."

"You have written other books of your views," she interrupted in her eagerness. "Will you let me read them?"

"With pleasure—on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That your husband consents to your borrowing them."

"Canon Presyllett? Oh! I am sure that he will never consent."

"Then I am afraid that I cannot lend you the books."

The girl's face flushed almost angrily. She had grown into a comfortable habit of dismissing the Rector entirely from her thoughts the moment she was out of his presence and free from the spiritual distraction of his worldly opposition. It was very irritating to have his supposed authority thrown in the way of her will like this, by a man, too, whom she had considered free from all the restraints of any conventionality.

"But if you believe that your books are true, surely Canon Presyllett has no right to decide whether I should hear the truth or not?" she asked, too eager for his opinion to think of the impression he would receive from her words with regard to her relationship with her husband.

"I have not given much thought to the question of a husband's rights and authority," he said with a smile. "I am not married, you know. I was only thinking that if you adopted my views it would have the effect of placing you and your husband at variance, and I do not care to take the responsibility of doing that. When two people are married, I think that there should be complete confidence between them, and I should hesitate to interfere with that confidence."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that there was no confidence or sympathy between herself and her husband; that they were not really married. There was something in the man's personality, in his perfect honesty of thought and freedom from conventional bias, which made her feel as she had never felt with anybody but Cecile—with her husband least of all,—that she could tell him anything. Perhaps it was only the remembrance that the secret of her spiritual compact was not entirely her own which restrained her. She bit her lip, and took up her sling to go.

"Good-bye, then," she said, holding out her hand to him. "I hope that we shall meet again."

"Although I am an infidel, Mrs. Presyllett?" he said, with the half-humorous smile in his eyes, as he shook her

offered hand with conscientious perfunctoriness. "I do not think that the Rector would like to hear you say that. You will tell him of our interview?"

"Certainly."

The mention of her husband jarred on her again, and she walked through the quaintly beautiful hall and out into the dusty road, revolting against the empty tie which made her a wife in the eyes of the world, and raised obstacles to her fuller knowledge of Gabriel Lyne. It seemed to her that with their single-minded honesty and unselfish enthusiasm for truth, it was impossible for them to exchange views without coming to some point of agreement. Her creed might become a little different, a little higher. She had abandoned the idea that it must necessarily be the infallible standard creed by which all others must be judged; but at the same time she had no doubt that its principles were true, and she felt that she could make the Infidel see that they were true. If they could only exchange views, he must see the need of prayer, the need for accepting the salvation of Christ, that only through Him can we approach or please God. She was sure that he would see the truth plainly, if she could only talk to him more; and she would save his soul while he was helping her to become less proud and opinionated. The prospect was alluring, but, like a black shadow, her nominal marriage to Canon Presyllett barred the way.

She was angry with the Infidel for allowing it to do so. It was a mere conventional scruple, to which she would have expected him to rise superior.

But, of course, her soul was of no more account to him than that of one of the ten thousand readers waiting for his book. The thought piqued her, and her natural conceit rose in arms against it. He considered her a child, and thought she could not help him. Perhaps she could not. But oh if she could! To influence such a man, and make him a leader for Christ instead of an opponent. It was a divine ambition. It was a duty, for every moment that she was remaining silent his influence was affecting ten thousand minds. To make that influence a Christian one was surely the worthiest task she could set herself for God.

She was glad when she reached home to find that the Canon was out, and to lunch alone. Her husband's presence would have distracted her thoughts, and she shrank from seeing him yet, with a mental and physical repulsion.

After lunch she had intended to continue her evangelical visitation, but the humbling influence of her morning's interview had made her more anxious to learn than to teach, and she trudged instead into Barnwood to order a copy of each of Gabriel Lyne's books. If the Infidel admitted her husband's right to interfere in the matter, Angela did not, and she asked for the books without a twinge of conscience.

Meanwhile Gabriel Lyne was hard at work on the volume which was to follow them.

When Angela had left the cottage inwardly chafing at the scant interest he took in her, he had picked up the ministerial bunch of flowers which she had brought as an aid to his conversion, but had forgotten. He kissed them impulsively.

"Oh! God," he said, falling on his knees, with an involuntary use of the words and attitude of strong emotion inherited from his Christian days. "Oh! God, she is a hundred times more honest and humble and beautiful than I thought her, and I want her for my own. I want her, body and soul."

He was kissing the flowers that she had gathered and carried, and the violence of his passion frightened him.

"Damn it, this won't do," he said aloud, struggling for self-control; and rising from his knees, he forced himself to roll and light a cigarette, with which he marched up and down the room, trying to think calmly over his position.

"I am in love with another man's wife," he said aloud, "and I could get her if I tried. She does not love Presyllett. Her manner shows it, even if love were possible between them. She is tied by her soul, not her heart; and I have her soul in my hand, if I choose. She is so honest, so indifferent to policy and conventional opinion. She would see truth at once if I showed it to her, and then I should be her God."

He could see it all very plainly and truly. The real

similarity between their natures, which had made him fall half in love with his beautiful Nun at the moment of their meeting, enabled him to read her soul. She was himself, himself in the days of his enthusiastic adherence to Christianity; and he knew her as he knew himself. He could see the moment when marriage would cease to be more than a human institution to her, and understand how, in the first breaking of the chains of imagined divine command, she would defy the conventions built up by men less pure than herself, and become a law to herself. But he himself had passed beyond that point, and, in casting off the idea that any law or custom was "specially divine," had begun to look for a divine principle in each one. Finding inspiration from the Creative Mind in the instincts which have grown in men with their growing experience and understanding of creation, he attached a certain authority to the customs and laws which their experience has evolved. His attitude made him yield to every law of society until he had discovered its principle, and by following the principle purely could raise himself above the law. He did not believe with Canon Pressylett that mankind had abandoned promiscuity and polygamy through obedience to a supernaturally revealed dogma, through fear of a supernaturally revealed punishment, or in hope of a supernaturally revealed reward; but the very fact that they had been influenced by natural motives threw the whole experience of mankind into the scale on the side of monogamy when he weighed it with any other form of union between the sexes, asking himself which was best for mankind, and if for mankind, for himself. His whole habit of morality depended upon this practice he had of considering himself as a unit of mankind, not as a special being with particular difficulties and particular rules of conduct which would be wise for himself but unwise for everybody else.

It was this practice of thought which helped him now, as he walked up and down the low-ceilinged room calmly considering, over a cigarette, the advisability of winning another man's wife.

Judged as a special individual case, the idea appealed to him with almost overwhelming strength.

Putting aside the purely selfish consideration that Mrs. Presyllett was the very woman he wanted for a wife, the only one probably for whom he would ever feel the passion that swayed him, he could not doubt that her union with him would be a much happier one for her than her union with the ascetic. Her manner had told him, in the few brief moments that Presyllett was mentioned between them, what he had anticipated already from his knowledge of the Canon's character and hers—that no real sympathy or affection could exist between them. The fact would make the Canon's loss very small if his wife were stolen. If he had married her for her money, he was welcome to keep it; if he had married her for passion, there were other women in the world for him, without the need for him to appropriate a personality which he could not value and which Gabriel himself could. If he wanted only a district visitor and permanent curate, every unmarried lady over thirty in his parish would rush for the post, even if he had been obliged to obtain a divorce from his wife before he could offer it. Public opinion never frightened Lyne. Social life did not appeal to him, and solitude with a woman he loved would be perfect happiness to him. Of the few friends he valued, most would accept as cheerfully his right to make a social experiment as they accepted his right to defy religious opinion. The Squire and his wife might not be so lenient, but then, of course, he would leave Windlehurst, and live abroad probably.

It was only when he tried to view the idea as a principle that his thoughtfulness for others as well as his own desire ceased to urge the step. Was he prepared to lay it down as a principle that when a man sees two people unsuitably married he has a right to step in and break the marriage tie? Why not? Why did the idea repel him even before he had begun to consider it? Was it merely prejudice?

Gabriel rolled himself another cigarette and lighted it.

"I ought to have thought all this out in cold blood before it began to affect me," he said aloud. It was hard for him to consider the question impartially when the beautiful eyes of the woman he loved were before his mind, appealing to him to set her free from her hard useless creed and the

inhuman ascetic that it had transformed for a fatal few weeks into a hero. It was hard to think that she must be bound to him till death divided them, and still—to destroy the permanence of marriage. Mrs. Gateacre's oration came back to him, with her views about the growth of married happiness and compatibility. It was surely the knowledge that marriage was permanent which made two people grow to one another, when the first idealisation of courtship was ruined by propinquity. And then there was the breaking down of family life.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Gabriel, dropping his cigarette in the startling suddenness with which the thought had suggested itself, "there may be a child already, to be born without a father if I take her away from him, or to live perhaps without a mother after a legal wrangle, to live always as a terrible reminder to her of a mistake, a child partly hers and not part mine. The thought would ruin her life; and as for the child, poor thing! No, it is not to be thought of."

From his own special case he had read back to the principle which makes men insist so strongly on the permanence of the marriage tie. It is the children who demand that the step, once taken, however inadvisedly, shall never be drawn back.

Of course there might not be a child, appealing to him unborn not to separate its father and mother and rob it of a parent; but if not, it was only an accident, and Gabriel Lyne could never find justification for any step in an accident. Whatever was right for him must be right for everybody, and he bowed to the inevitable.

The suggestion which Squire Gateacre had made to him with regard to the Canon's marriage had appeared to him so absurd, so inconsistent with what he could read from the clergyman's face of sensuality and passion, that it had never taken root in his mind; he had actually forgotten it, and admitting the marriage as a true and ordinary one, he found himself compelled to consider it sacred.

Angela's flowers were lying on the table where he had laid them reverently. He seized them now, and tossed them into the fire.



Then he lighted another cigarette.

"The question is whether I ought to leave Windlehurst at once," he said once more, aloud.

He was very unwilling to do so, for his book had to be finished quickly, and moving always unsettled him for work.

"I think that I may leave my safety to the Canon," he said after a long pause, and a grim smile played on his lips. "She has promised to tell him of our interview. He will take care that it is not repeated."

Then he seated himself at his desk, and calculated the number of days which it would take him to finish his work. With hard toil it could be done in five.

By way of burning his boats as far as possible, he scribbled off a note to his impatient publisher pledging his word to deliver the manuscript in that time.

Then he wrote and booked himself a passage on board a liner starting for the States on the sixth day. It was a trip he had been promising himself when he had finished his book, and it appeared to him now in the light of a deliverance from a great temptation.

How could he guess that the woman he loved paid no heed to her husband's commands when they opposed the dictates of her conscience, and that already she was seeing the finger of God directing her once more to undertake the conversion of the Windlehurst Infidel?

## CHAPTER XX

IN the principal bookseller's shop in Barnwood, where Angela ordered Gabriel Lyne's works, there were two counters, and if the Rector's wife had not been too full of her purpose to glance round the place when she entered, she would have seen the petite figure of Miss Iphigenia standing at the other desk.

The little Tomtit had been glad to find the place empty, and there was a trace of nervousness in her chirrupy voice as she asked for a cheap edition of Ouida's "Moths." For in Windlehurst Ouida was still on the borderland of respectability.

"I beg your pardon," said the shopman, for the nervous chirrup had been too low for him to catch her words. To Iphigenia's guilty conscience there was something of incredulity and condemnation in his voice, and a flush came into her cheeks.

"A book called 'Moths,'" she repeated. "I think that it is by Ouida. I wish to make a present of it to a friend."

The gratuitous information was not quite false. She was buying the novel for Prudence, although they both would read it.

This giving of presents between the sisters was a carefully arranged method by which they gave themselves luxuries without any feeling of selfish extravagance. The presentations were made in turn, and each sister kept careful account of the sum she had expended, expecting the other to balance accounts exactly by her next offering of friendship. Iphigenia was working off a debit of half-a-crown, and intended to supplement the book with half-a-dozen green figs, of which she was inordinately fond herself. Prudence was more partial

to sweets, and generally gave her sister chocolates in consequence.

The shopman had a loud voice, and repeated the name of the book with a cruel distinctness, which made the little Tomtit perk her head round apprehensively.

She almost uttered an exclamation of dismay when she caught sight of Angela's grey cloak. Luckily, however, her niece did not appear to have noticed her, and Iphigenia hurried through her purchase in such haste that she forgot to ask for the discount. The Barnwood bookseller was in a state of transition with regard to that latest blessing of civilisation, threepence in the shilling, and gave it only to the earnest inquirer. It was the first time that Miss Iphigenia had sacrificed it, but she gained her reward in having the reprehensible volume stowed away in her bag by the time that Angela happened to look round.

Miss Gaydon was always glad to meet her niece, the wife of Canon Presyllett, in public, and she greeted her effusively. Perhaps she talked a little more quickly than usual to prevent Angela asking what she was buying.

"I suppose you have been purchasing some devotional book, dear?" she asked brightly, her fear of her niece's question unconsciously prompting her own

"I am ordering copies of all Mr. Gabriel Lyne's works," said Angela calmly, enjoying, in spite of her devoutness, a sense of pleasure at shocking her aunt. "The man has just gone to see if they have any in stock."

Miss Iphigenia's qualms of conscience with regard to Ouida disappeared. Ouida had been sanctioned by many very good and well-to-do people in the village, but the Infidel's books! Nobody with any claim to respectability could read such things, surely.

Her round eyes opened widely in shocked surprise.

"My dear child, you really cannot know what they are," she said primly. "I understand that they are not fit books for any lady to read. One of them at least is perfectly shocking. Miss Butcher was telling me about it. Oh no, of course she would not think of reading it, but a friend of hers, who had read a review of it in one of the most

respectable Church papers, told her about it; and really—well! the title is enough coming from such a man.” The little woman sank her voice to a shocked whisper. “It is called ‘Personal Purity.’ Of course you are married, dear, and may think that you can read books which I should not dream of doing myself; but to ask for such a work publicly in a shop. It is shocking. Surely the dear Canon——”

“Oh no, Canon Presyllett does not know that I am getting the books,” said Angela calmly. “I am afraid that like you, dear Aunt Iphigenia, he is very unjustly prejudiced against Mr. Lyne.”

“But, my dear Angela, the man is an open and proclaimed infidel.”

“That does not prevent his being an honest and good man,” answered Angela, wondering herself at the enthusiasm of her defence. “I have just been having half-an-hour’s talk with Mr. Lyne at his house, and it has not only made me anxious to read all he has written, but has made me quite sure that I shall find nothing in his books that is not prompted by an earnest and sincere desire for truth.”

Her aunt gazed at her in speechless horror, little guessing that in every sign she showed of baseless prejudice against the Infidel, Angela was seeing a picture of her own past attitude, and feeling more and more ashamed of it. A feeling that she had been unfair to the man in the past, made her all the more eager to defend him now.

“What have you heard against Mr. Lyne except that he holds opinions different from our own?” she asked; and the little Tomtit held up her hands.

“Hundreds of things. That he never enters a church; that he goes boating on Sunday, and is trying to open the reading-room on that day, and make everybody as bad as himself; that he writes blasphemous and immoral books.”

“I am sure that his books are not immoral or wilfully blasphemous, and the rest is simply saying that Mr. Lyne holds different opinions from ourselves, and has the moral courage to act according to them in spite of what people think of him.”

The conversation was interrupted by the return of the shopman, who had been hunting in his store-room.

"I am afraid that I have sold the books I had in stock," he said to Angela. "I generally keep them. The fact that Mr. Lyne is a resident in the neighbourhood, and takes such a share in philanthropic matters in the town, creates a demand for them, I suppose. I understand that in spite of his views he is a very generous man, and does a great deal of good among the poor."

He went on chatting about the Infidel, feeling that it was safe to mention his good points, even to a Rector's wife, after she had taken so much interest in his writings.

"I hear," he went on, "that he is building a model workmen's dwelling at the other end of the town."

Angela's face flushed with enthusiasm, for the announcement was news to her, and raised Gabriel Lyne even higher in her estimation.

"I suppose he is doing it as a sort of penance," said Iphigenia; and her niece's eyes flashed dangerously. But the bookseller's presence prevented her answering. She turned to him to make inquiries about the house which was being built.

It was just the project which she had set before herself to carry out in concert with her husband, and the feeling of repulsion which was beginning to accompany every thought of the Canon came over her strongly as she remembered how he had dispelled her dream. She found herself wondering whether the man who in spite of his non-Christianity was really doing God's work would let her take a share in it.

"Do you know whether Mr. Lyne is a wealthy man?" she asked; and she felt a distinct regret when the bookseller answered—

"Very, I believe. His novels have a large sale, and there is a greater demand for his philosophical works than there usually is for books of that character."

She left the shop wishing that he had been poorer, so that her fortune might have assisted him in building the house, and she listened with deaf ears to the long exhortation which her aunt felt bound to administer to her.

"I know that you consider your work very important, dear," she said, "visiting all sorts of queer people, and treating them all, respectable or otherwise, as if they were on the same level; but I cannot help thinking that you might be better employed looking after your home like other married ladies. I am sure there are plenty of texts in the Bible—although I cannot call one to mind at this moment—to show that a married lady's place is in the house, looking after the meals and all that sort of thing. Prudence and I both think it a strange sort of Christianity which allows you to leave everything to Mrs. Graeme—such an unpleasant and taciturn woman too. I often think of what my poor dear mother used to say—that a woman cannot go far wrong in her duty to God if she keeps her husband happy and well-fed, and with decent clothes on his back; and I am sure that poor dear Pa could never be seen with so much as a hole in his socks. And you leave even the mending of the Canon's underlinen to the housekeeper. It may be very religious of you, but it does not seem womanly to me or to Prudence. I am hoping that you will look at things in a different light before your children come, or I do not know what will become of them."

Angela shuddered. Her face flushed.

"I shall have no children," she said quickly, almost instinctively.

The old maid misunderstood the words.

"You have not been married very long yet, dear," she remarked sagely, and flushed herself to think that she had spoken like a person who knows anything about the secret of birth, and not as the innocent, ignorant, unmarried girl which theoretically she ought to be.

Angela did not answer, and the little Tomtit went back to the subject of the Canon's housekeeper. The desire to see her sent away and the management of the Rectory handed to her own charge as her niece's instructor was the real motive of her exhortation, although she did not for a moment realise the fact herself.

"Prudence and I both think that you would set a more Christian example to the parish if you dispensed with Mrs.

Graeme's services and began to take a little more interest in your own home," she went on, warming to her subject. "Of course you would find it rather strange at first, but both Prudence and I would give you what help we could, living for a little while with you, one at a time of course, while you got used to management. I should be pleased to take the first turn."

She chattered along energetically as they walked down the street together, encouraged by the fact that her niece was less dogmatic than usual, less ready to quote texts and the example of Jesus and the saints in support of her want of domesticity.

Angela was glad to find that the little woman had still her shopping to do, and to part company with her at the fruiterer's when Miss Iphigenia went for her green figs.

She walked home very slowly thinking all the way, thoughts that had never entered her mind before. She began by comparing Gabriel Lyne with other people—with her aunt, with her husband, and with Cecile.

Everything she had seen in the Infidel's character inclined her to idealise him into a hero. Before she knew who he was, she had looked upon him as a model Christian, the real sympathy of their natures making her throw a glowing light over the trifling signs he had given her of his interest in the poor, of a desire to consider others rather than himself. When the revelation of his name came to her, the contrast between what he was and what she had expected had only intensified her admiration for his personal character. An infidel always has this advantage over a professed Christian, that while the actions of the latter are compared with the ideal he professes to set before himself and generally found wanting, every good and humane deed of the non-Christian is considered a work of supererogation, and gains in lustre by comparison with the hopeless depravity we expect from him. Against this dark background of expected depravity Gabriel Lyne stood out like an angel of light in the girl's eyes. Every professed Christian unconsciously selects from the list of Christian virtues two or three which appeal specially to his nature, and which he allows to overshadow the others. That is why there is such variety of character and action

among even ardent and honest adherents of the creed. What uniformity there is owes its existence to the generally accepted but erroneous idea that common-sense is a Christian virtue, and the fact of its general adoption as first in the list.

Angela owed her singularity to the fact that she subordinated common-sense to the three great virtues of honesty, courage, and compassion. She had the honesty to act as her creed made her claim to act, the courage to defy public opinion when it would prevent her doing so, and a compassion which made her take to heart the worldly sorrows and spiritual dangers of others.

So far, the first virtue had made her a fanatic, the second a prig, and the third a busybody; and it was Gabriel Lyne's clear realisation that all these lamentable results were due to her supposed possession of infallible truth which made him admire her through her faults, and burn to release her from the bondage of a creed which perverted all her nobility of character into deplorable channels.

It was these three virtues which made up Angela's conception of Christianity, and the fact that she saw them clearly in Gabriel Lyne made him an ideal, while it rendered his disavowal of Christianity incredible to her.

How much greater his honesty was than Canon Presyllett's! When the Infidel spoke, she felt that his words came from his heart. The Canon's arguments she had learnt to look upon as mere excuses intended to persuade her into some action which he wanted her to perform for some selfish motive quite independent of his arguments. Too often it was so; but Angela, with a woman's impulsiveness, exaggerated her husband's faults no doubt, as well as Lyne's virtues. She could almost worship the courageous disregard of public opinion which had made him openly proclaim himself an infidel in face of the universal prejudice against the name to which she herself had foolishly lent support in the past. She compared his independence with the trembling timidity of her aunts, who dared not obey their consciences unless it was respectable and ladylike to do so, and did not stop to consider that Gabriel suffered very little from his social ostracism from Windlehurst society.



His compassion for the poor appealed to her most of all, and made him nobler even than Cecile, whose retirement to a convent had always appeared to her friend rather selfish when there were so many of Christ's poor in the world waiting for help and instruction.

It seemed to her as if she had found the ideal Christian whom she had vainly sought since her arrival in England for guide and friend, only to discover that he denied his Christianity. It was a great shock to her faith: for the first time she saw goodness and Christianity dissociated. Before, she had always thought of them as one and the same, and had needed no argument for her creed when she saw it opposed only by evildoers. The association in her mind was a natural one, for the people she had loved and admired most had all been devout Christians—her mother, Cecile, and all the friends of her youth. The most devout among them had always been also the most kind, and sympathetic, and unselfish.

But here was a man who she felt to be kind, and sympathetic, and unselfish, and who denied the truth of Christianity.

If Christianity and goodness were not the same thing, what was Christianity? What was it that she believed differently from Gabriel Lyne, and why did she believe it?

The Infidel had acted unwisely in refusing to lend his books to her, if his only object had been to prevent her abandoning her creed; for, as we have seen, his refusal only promised to defer her reading for a couple of days, and meanwhile the absence of any tangible point of difference between them had driven her back to an examination of her own belief and her reasons for holding it. It is a dangerous experiment for an honest-minded Christian who will accept no excuse for his faith which would not equally excuse a Buddhist retaining his Buddhism, or a Mohammedan his Mohammedanism.

The first thing that she realised was that she had never been a true Christian herself, and her heart leaped with relief at the thought that God had sent her this meeting with Gabriel Lyne to show her the fact and purify her faith. She was becoming anxious to find justification for herself

after the spiritual disturbance which had followed her meeting, and to feel slight qualms as to whether the Canon might not have been right in forbidding her to talk to the Infidel; but now she saw the great flaw in her Christianity from which the disturbance had sprung, and her journey to "The Barn" became once more the leading of her Lord.

She had trusted too much in works, and Christ was reminding her that faith in Him was everything and works nothing. She had been able to confuse the two in her mind in exhorting evildoers; for their faith in Jesus had always in her mind been the beginning of a cleaner life, and she had persuaded herself that they were to be saved by faith, when in reality she was expecting them to have eternal life as a reward for the good works that followed it. In order to show her her mistake the ever-kind God had sent her a man whose works were perfect, but who had no faith in Jesus.

Her admiration for him showed her surely that faith was nothing to her, and she tried to steel her heart against the man, and think of him once more as a wilful offender against God, deserving of the eternal pains of hell.

But it was impossible to think of Gabriel Lyne as a wilful offender. If he would not say that he believed in Jesus even to save his soul, it was only because he *did* not believe in Him, not that he wouldn't. And according to her creed he must be damned everlastingly because of an opinion that he conscientiously held. It was easy to think of people being punished for want of faith, when that want was accompanied as a matter of course by all kinds of moral wickedness; but it was very hard to think of a man being damned for want of faith that arose from conscientiousness. She imagined her husband, with his mental dishonesty, his ingrained selfishness and egotism, sitting in bliss, with Jakes the butcher perhaps, if he died repentant,—and he was very repentant and believed in Jesus completely after every debauch,—she could see them looking down complacently on the tortures of a man whose life had been so much holier than their own, and whose only fault had been honest misconception.

Her soul rose in involuntary revolt against her God. How could He be just if this thing could be?

Her own revolt shocked her, and she tried to pray that she might see His justice even in what seemed to her worldly eyes unjust ; but as she stopped in her walk along the lonely road, clasping her hands and looking upwards, Gabriel Lyne's view of prayer came to her, and made her ask only that she might believe what was true and feel what was right.

When she reached home she entered by the back entrance, feeling that she must prepare herself, and understand the hundred new thoughts which had come to her since the morning, before meeting her husband and telling him of her interview with the Infidel. Her sense of infallibility had been shaken, and she shrank from the reproaches which she knew he would heap upon her in the place of sympathy or assistance.

Through dread of meeting him she hurried to her own room, and spent the rest of the day there, fasting, but too full of her new thoughts to feel conscious of hunger.

## CHAPTER XXI

THAT night Angela dreamed a dream. It was the outcome of her day's experience—her wishes, the vague remembrance of a Sunday-school book in which the good little girl converted the wicked infidel by asking him where the first egg came from, and an empty stomach. But to Angela it was the direct inspiration of her God.

She had managed by much prayer and Bible-reading to make peace with Him before going to sleep, and, with the humility and subjection which He expects from His children, had reconciled the idea of His justice not with Gabriel Lyne's damnation, but with his liability to damnation if he died in his unbelief. She had justified her God by the remembrance that Gabriel Lyne was not dead yet, and by assuring herself that the just God would never allow honesty to lead a man finally to unbelief. She evolved for her purpose a hypothesis which she had invented for the purpose of meeting her doubts. She had been brought face to face with the fact that a man can honestly and conscientiously reject the need of Christ's salvation, but she had never met with any instance of a man who had died while honestly rejecting it; and she justified Deity by telling herself that He would not let Gabriel Lyne die until he had seen the truth, that finally honest thought must end in belief.

Instead of altering her conception of Deity and Divine truth to meet the facts of life, she invented the facts of life to meet her conception of Divine truth.

Her invention was so satisfactory that she felt sure it must be true. It enabled her to master the terrible doubt of Divine justice which had distressed and shocked her; it justified her interview with the Infidel by leaving her with

faith not only unshaken, but purified by her rejection of her old trust in "works." It gave her renewed certainty that God had chosen her as the humble instrument in His hands for saving the unbeliever's soul, and new hope of success. Because, by her invented data, his belief had become inevitable.

The hope inspired her dream.

She was back in the cosy low-ceilinged room at "The Barn," no longer startled and feeble, but strong with the sense of Divine aid and a Divine mission. It was the Infidel who looked disturbed. In her dream Angela felt inspired, and she was convincing him of sin.

"You think that to lead a good life and do good works will justify you in the eyes of the Creator in whom you believe," she said,—and when she woke she remembered almost the exact words she had spoken,—“but even if your life is better than that of any man living, think how far short it must fall of what the Creator demands from each of us. Think how many thousands of opportunities you have necessarily omitted of doing good, through thoughtlessness, or because they have never occurred to you. Think of the time that you have spent on yourself, on the enjoyment of mere worldly delights, the delights of secular reading,”—she waved her hand towards his bookshelves,—“the delights of artistic taste,”—she pointed towards the hall with its many treasures. “How much thought and money have you not spent on yourself, with no thought of serving your Maker.”

The Infidel looked conscience-stricken.

“I have done more good with my money than most men,” he said. “I am now building a model dwelling for the poor at Barnwood.”

“That is true,” said Angela. “Compared with other men, even declared servants of our Lord, like Canon Presyllett, you seem the noblest man I have known. But comparison with other men does not help to justify us before God. He demands that we should be perfect as He is perfect, and in His justice He must punish every falling short of that perfection.”

“Looked at in that light,” said the Infidel, becoming more

conscience-stricken than ever, "I deserve a terrible punishment. I had been telling myself that it was enough to be as good as humanly I could be, and that the Creator could not judge me more harshly than others when my performance was better than theirs."

"That was only human pride," said Angela severely, in her dream. "But, if God is just, then He must punish every falling short of absolute perfection."

"Then how am I to escape His just punishment?" said the Infidel; and in her dream Angela smiled.

"Jesus has taken your punishment. You have only to cast your sins upon Him and they are all forgiven."

The dream ended very prettily, with the Infidel on his knees; and Angela woke, the fortunate recipient of a Divine inspiration.

She was surprised to find it broad daylight. Her spiritual struggle had kept her awake long into the night, and when at last it was ended, her sleep had been the sleep of thorough exhaustion, and lasted long after her usual hour for rising.

Just as she was ascertaining the fact from the watch under her pillow, there came the sound of a low tap at her door.

"Well?" said Angela, sitting up in bed; and the Canon's voice came from the other side of the locked door—

"I am just going out, dear, and wanted to speak to you first."

"I will dress quickly and come down to you," she said. "I have overslept myself this morning."

There was a moment's pause, and then the clergyman's voice came in a low tone, which she could barely catch—

"I cannot wait. Could I not come in for a moment?"

She sprang out of bed and walked to the door with naked feet, the bosom of her nightdress open. But she had no idea of turning the key.

"I am afraid you cannot," she answered in her quiet, calm voice. "What is it you wished to say?"

"It will have to wait unless you can open the door," he said, less pleasantly than he had spoken before.

"Or if it is very important, I shall be down in five minutes," answered Angela cheerfully. But the Canon's

retreating footsteps told her that he had not waited for her reply.

She called after him. It would be convenient to tell him from her point of vantage that she had seen the Windlehurst Infidel and was about to pay him another visit. It would at least prevent the unseemly scene of the previous day, when he had dared to try and coerce her by brute force into obeying his wishes rather than the dictates of her conscience.

The Canon's opposition to almost all her plans had not yet had the effect of driving her to the least subterfuge or concealment. As before her marriage, it was easier for her to be defiant than underhanded. She insisted on following her own path, but she had taken care to inform the Canon always in what direction her path led her. She knew that he objected to her visiting Lyne, but she no more thought of visiting him secretly than of consenting not to visit him at all.

It was too late for her to make her announcement now, however. Either the Canon did not hear her, or he was in too much of a temper to come back; and when, exactly five minutes later, Angela ran downstairs, he had left the house.

His departure seemed to the devout girl a special kindness of God, who thus removed an obstacle that would lie in the way of her mission. By the time that she returned from "The Barn" she might be able to tell the Canon that Gabriel Lyne was a Christian, and thus remove altogether his opposition and his prejudice against her seeing him.

Flushed at the prospect, Angela hurried through her cold meal, scribbled a note for her husband when he returned, saying where she was going, and that she might be late for lunch, and started on her second attempt.

She turned up by the decaying finger-post less than half-an-hour after the Rector had passed it by on his way to the village, his mind still full of his wife's revolt.

It was a sin against God. It must be conquered.

And more and more clearly it appeared to him that the only way to the girl's will was through her heart; that she would never become the docile pliant piece of furniture that religion demanded until he had made her love him. And

with Canon Presyllett, as we have seen, love was passion, and passion was love.

Calmly, and with the assumed sanction of Divinity, he told himself that he must rouse in his cold wife the passion he felt himself, and the satisfaction of which he admitted to be unclean.

His first effort, he saw, had been disastrous. His attempt to show his power by an exercise of brute force had only alienated her more than ever, and he determined to humble himself, and beg her forgiveness for his roughness—not that he felt the least need for her forgiveness, or the least qualm of conscience for what he had done, but simply as a means to an end.

It was to make his apology that he had gone to her room, thinking that if he could cheat her into giving him audience there, it would be the first step towards destroying that reserve which stood like a cold wall at present dividing them, and baffling his efforts to mould her like clay in his hand.

He walked along the village street thinking of his plans, not uncheerfully. He had failed so far, but there was plenty of time before him, and, with Angela always under the same roof as himself, it was strange if he could not win her in time. He had been too austere with her in the past, but he would relax austerity for a little while and show her only kindness. The righteousness of the end he had in view would even make excusable the sin of tenderness.

Her threat on the previous evening to return to Lilac Lodge and disclaim the slender tie which bound them together made him more than ever eager in the pursuit of her. From the first, when he had begun to realise her independence of thought and her carelessness of public opinion, he had been afraid that she might make him ridiculous in the eyes of the world by proclaiming the emptiness of their marriage; and the real liberty of action she enjoyed in spite of his opposition had been greatly due to his fear.

He was beginning remotely to question whether the need for strengthening the tie might not justify a single lapse of perfect purity; but the girl's independence of will, while it



vaguely suggested the idea, prevented it at the same time from taking practical shape.

Canon Presyllett was too economical with his holiness to justify to himself a lapse which was not practicable. He avoided an attitude of thought which threatened to leave him again without credit or gratification. While his wife kept him aloof, he was too prudent to think of his aloofness as other than a Divine duty.

The first instinctive jealousy of Gabriel Lyne, which had made him lose his self-control when his wife proposed visiting the Infidel, had toned down a little on maturer thought. Judging Angela by himself, he could not understand her ever getting beyond a fierce antipathy to a man who held opinions utterly opposed to her own—opinions which, if true, would make her every action ridiculous; and he did not expect Lyne to be very much attracted even by a beautiful woman when she went to him only to sternly denounce his sins.

One interview could not harm her, but he must take care that her ardour did not throw her too much into the man's company; for, crediting both Lyne and Angela with natures like his own, the Canon could not ignore the fact that the Infidel was physically a perfect type of manhood, and Angela beautiful. He hoped that his wife would leave the unbeliever alone when she found how powerless she was to argue with him; for, in spite of Angela's declaration that she was going in the strength of God and relying on prayer, it never occurred to him for a moment to imagine his wife affecting the Infidel's mind. Canon Presyllett believed as little in the power of prayer as Gabriel Lyne himself, when it was the prayer of a person acting in opposition to himself.

He walked along the village street with his eyes on the ground, until he was roused from his thoughts by hearing his name, and glancing up, found that the two old maids of Lilac Lodge were coming out of the rebellious grocer's across the road, and were waving their umbrellas with one accord to attract his attention.

He crossed the road at once, intending to remonstrate with them upon dealing with a tradesman who could get up an irreligious petition in opposition to the minister of his parish.

The old maids began to talk in unison, however, before he reached them.

"We were just on our way to the Rectory to see you," said Miss Prudence.

"How fortunate that we did not miss you," said Miss Iphigenia, trying to drown her voice. "I wish that you would put that umbrella down, Prue, and not keep waving it in that ridiculous manner. The Canon has seen us."

"We have decided to speak to you on a matter of rather grave importance," said Miss Prudence, ignoring her sister and tripping forward.

It was the first complete sentence that the clergyman had managed to catch.

"Then I am very pleased to have met you," he said, in the sweetly modulated voice which came so easily to him when he was sure of his hearers' attention and admiration. "Should you like me to return to the Rectory with you, or can you be telling me what this grave matter is while we walk? I was going to the other end of the village."

"Then we will go with you," they said together.

"We were anxious to find you alone," said Miss Prudence.

"Because it is about Angela," explained Miss Iphigenia; and they ranged themselves one on each side of him, making him look taller and gaunter than ever between them, each trying to gain his ear.

He gathered with some difficulty that they thought it their duty to make to him a revelation about his wife which they felt certain he could not know.

"Perhaps if Miss Prudence would tell me all about it," he suggested mildly, "I should be able to listen more closely."

The senior Tomtit flushed with pleasure, and cast a glance of triumph at her sister.

"But Prudence does not know anything except what I have told her," said Iphigenia; and a dispute seemed imminent, when Prudence remembered the Canon's sermon on giving way. The effect of it had not been entirely lost, and her sweet Christian methods had been reserved for occasional use when they could be made effective. An occasion had

arisen now for displaying them in the presence of the clergyman, and Prudence turned to her sister.

"You shall tell Canon Presyllett if you wish, dear. I am only too glad to be saved such a painful task. Tell him, dear."

"Certainly, dear, if you would rather not," said Iphigenia as sweetly; and, feeling that she had robbed her sister of an expected moral victory, she proceeded with enthusiasm to pour her startling tale into the ears of the unsuspecting clergyman.

According to Miss Iphigenia, the Rector's wife had admitted to her that she was on terms of quite close intimacy with Gabriel Lyne, that she admired him very much, and expected to find his works all true when she read them.

"She would not have admitted it if Iphigenia had not caught her in Crawford's ordering a copy of every one of the man's horrible books," put in Prudence, whose sweet resignation and sense of pain at the revelation could not enable her to keep silent long.

"My wife has ordered Lyne's books?" said the Canon incredulously.

"Every one of them," said both the old maids together.

"And paid for them," said Prudence.

"Two pounds ten shillings," added Iphigenia, speaking quickly, to get the crowning fact out before her sister.

They had reached the gate of Lilac Lodge by this time, and the ladies stopped at the gate.

Prudence invited the Canon in. A sense of the proprieties always made Iphigenia leave this task to her sister, since Prudence was the elder, if only by twenty minutes.

Canon Presyllett did not accept the invitation, however. The revelation had come like a thunderbolt to him. Instead of making allowance for a little excited exaggeration on the old maids' part, his jealousy made him think they were understating the friendship between their niece and the Infidel, and he looked upon Angela's announcement of the previous day as a simple subterfuge intended to conceal from him the fact that she had already met Lyne many times. He was anxious to get back to the house and confront her with his know-

ledge of her infamy; every moment that the old maids kept him from his purpose with their contending chatter added to his wrathful indignation, and made it more difficult to hide from them the shock which their information had given him, and which pride urged him to conceal.

His voice had lost little of its modulation as he thanked them for what they had told him.

"Angela informed me that she had an ambition to win Lyne back to the fold," he said, "but I did not know she was thinking of reading his works. I consider with you that it is rather injudicious, and will talk to her about it."

"I thought that it would be best to speak to you privately about it," said Iphigenia, pleased by his thanks.

"We talked it over together when my sister came over from Barnwood," put in Prudence hastily, "and I said at once that it was our duty to tell you, seeing that Angela admitted ordering the books without your knowledge."

"I am sure that she could not know what they are," said Iphigenia, her conscience smiting her a little for the energy with which she had indicted her niece. "I am quite sure that Angela is good and conscientious at heart, and that only her exaggerated ideas of duty have made her mix herself up with the man at all. Prudence and I always said that her ideas would lead her into some strange position before long. After all, a woman's true place is in the home."

"And what Angela really wants," interrupted Prudence, seeing what was coming, "is to interest herself more in domestic duties. I am sure that she would be less taken up with these quixotic ideas if——"

"Mrs. Graeme left the Rectory," chimed in Iphigenia quickly. "I have said so to Prudence all along. Of course she might find domestic duties rather strange at first, but we should be very glad to help her."

"We could come to the Rectory in turn for a little while," interrupted Prudence. "I should be most happy to help the child—for she is little more than a child—at first."

"And I," said Iphigenia, "I would take the first turn, if you like. Of course she would have a good deal to learn, but with a little patience I am sure that she would make

a good housewife, and her duties would give her less time for meddling with opinions which cannot help hurting her."

The Canon thanked them rather impatiently, and bid them "Good-day." Iphigenia, watching his gaunt figure disappear rapidly in the direction from which they had come, noticed that he had evidently given up his intention of making a call farther along the road.

"I hope that we have not made him angry with poor Angela," she said apprehensively; but when she glanced round her sister was gone. She had hurried indoors to secure the top hat-peg.

"I hope that he will not be very severe," said the little old maid again with a sigh, as she followed indoors, "but of course we can trust the dear Canon to be gentle and forgiving with her."

She would have found salve for her accusing conscience less readily, after her exaggerated indictment, if she could have read the thoughts which were in the clergyman's mind as he hastened home.

When he reached the house he walked straight into his study and rang the bell.

"Will you tell Mrs. Presyllett that I should like to speak to her at once."

"The mistress has gone out," said Jane; "she left a note for you, sir."

The Canon read it through hastily, his gaunt hands quivering with the intensity of his anger when he grasped its contents. His wife had shamelessly confessed that she was going to visit the Infidel again.

He crushed the paper in his hand, and strode out of the house in a white heat.

## CHAPTER XXII

AFTER Angela Presyllett had left him on the previous day, Gabriel Lyne had managed to get through a considerable amount of work. Although he preferred shirking a fight with temptation, he had plenty of resolution when fighting was necessary, and he kept Angela very successfully out of his mind, by sheer dogged determination, while he slashed away at his manuscript, doing four thousand words at it between noon and midnight.

Usually he went to bed early, for holiness meant health with him—health of body as well as of mind and heart; and the greatest and most useful mental achievement did not justify to him a flabby muscle or a disordered liver.

But to-night he felt that he must tire himself out before he went to bed, for fear of keeping himself awake thinking, and he wrote until he was tired enough to drop asleep the moment his head touched the pillow. When he woke at five he rose at once, hurried down to the river for a swim before breakfast, which to-day he took with Mrs. Marlow in the old-fashioned kitchen, in dread of a moment's loneliness.

He chatted brightly throughout the meal on subjects that interested her, the price of food chiefly, and the advantages of one soap over another. Mrs. Marlow pinned her faith on the good old-fashioned yellow soap, and Gabriel, true to his principles, thought that there was nothing in the world in which improvement might not be looked for, and urged her to try something new, in hopes that its inventor had found the improvement that was wanted.

After breakfast she got ready to go to Barnwood for the week's marketing, and Gabriel settled down once more at his desk. He had luckily reached the most interesting part of his

task, and he worked with as much enthusiasm as on the previous afternoon and evening.

It was not till he had laid down his pen at the end of a chapter, and was lighting a cigarette to think out the exact arrangement of the next, that he became conscious of a knock at the outside door. It seemed to him that he had been vaguely conscious of the sound for some minutes, but had been too engrossed to think of trying to explain it.

Mrs. Marlow had already started on her expedition, and he rose to open the door himself, expecting as he passed through the hall that he would only enjoy an interview with the usual tramp for his trouble. With his hand on the knob he stopped to relight his cigarette, which was burning badly, and he had it in his mouth when the door opened at his touch, and he stood face to face once more with his beautiful Nun.

His eyes involuntarily flashed a smile of welcome, and he took the hand she offered him.

"Have you been knocking long?" he asked in his courteous voice. "I was so engrossed writing that I am afraid I may have kept you waiting."

Angela smiled.

"I have been knocking so long, that I should have thought you were out if I had not met your housekeeper in the lane. She said I should find you at home."

She did not refer to the reluctance with which the good old soul had given the information, nor the meaning manner in which Mrs. Marlow had added that the author was quite alone.

"I am very sorry," he said. "I did not think that I should have the honour of another visit from you."

He was still blocking up the doorway, and had made no sign of inviting her to enter.

But Angela was acting under direct inspiration, and she could not allow any unwillingness on the unbeliever's part, much less any scruple of worldly propriety, to stand in her way and make her lose a chance of securing his eternal welfare.

"May I come in and talk to you about our religious

differences?" she asked directly, in her calm devout way; and Gabriel shrugged his shoulders.

"I am quite alone in the house, Mrs. Presyllett."

"That will give us all the better opportunity for a quiet talk," she said; and Gabriel felt rather taken aback. He had expected the announcement to save him any further trouble in avoiding a serious interview.

The politeness which was instinctive with him prevented his saying bluntly that he did not wish for it, and he fell back on his work for an excuse.

"I am very busy."

"I do not think I should take many minutes of your time, but if you like I will call again."

The struggle was an uneven one between the man whose unflinching courtesy was part of his religion, and the woman whose creed made surrender appear to her in this case little less than a sin.

If he sent her away now without convincing her conclusively that her attempt to convert him was hopeless, she would only keep him in a state of excitement looking for her appearance daily.

"I did not think that your husband would like you to have another interview with me," he said. "Is he not afraid, Mrs. Presyllett, that, instead of you converting me to his views, I may convert you to mine?"

Angela had been prepared for some such questioning after the affair of the books, and had been preparing herself for it.

"Canon Presyllett gives me complete liberty of action," she said calmly. It was true that the liberty was sanctioned only by the Canon's agreement before the wedding, and that he was always trying to break the agreement, but it seemed to Angela the simplest means of telling anybody of the terms on which she was bound to her nominal husband. Perhaps she had adopted a little of the Canon's method in order to make the statement appear to herself perfectly truthful. A touch of casuistry is well-nigh unavoidable when any certain course must be admitted right and pursued at all costs, and she never doubted for a moment that God required her to talk to Gabriel Lyne in spite of any scruple he might raise.



Seeing her determination, and unable to make himself shut the door in her face, Gabriel bowed to the inevitable.

"Let us have our talk in the garden, then," he said, leading the way through the hall, and the richly furnished drawing-room, and out of the open French windows to the pleasant lawn. "It is a pity to miss any of the sunshine, when we shall soon be losing it."

He led her to a rustic seat under a fine old apple-tree at the other side of the lawn, but remained standing himself, with one arm stretched up to a bending branch laden with fruit. "Will you have one of these Ribstons? They have almost the real old-fashioned flavour, that seems to be disappearing nowadays."

Angela declined, in a rather stately manner. Was the man laughing at her, to expect her to talk about Jesus while munching an apple?

The very suspicion helped her to control her thoughts, and conquer that feeling of inferiority which the Infidel inspired in her, as if she were a child, and he a man who had passed through childhood and understood all her thoughts.

He was looking down again at her with his half-amused smile.

"And so you have discovered the great flaw in my reasoning, the important principle of Christianity which I have overlooked," he said.

"I think that God has revealed it to me," answered Angela devoutly, and she tried hard to feel that serene sense of inspiration which had come to her in her dream. She would have found it easier if the man facing her had been more like the conscience-stricken creature of her vision. In her vision there had been no amused twinkle in the unbeliever's eye, no overpowering sense of friendly indulgence.

"Well?"

"I am afraid that you are attaching too much importance to a good life," she said. "You think that it will justify you in the sight of your Creator. But even if your life is better than that of any man living, think how far short it must fall of what the Creator demands from each of His creatures."

She spoke rapidly, anxious that her dream should be

reproduced as exactly as possible, and fearing from his face that he was about to interrupt her; but Gabriel listened quite patiently.

"Think how many thousands of opportunities you have necessarily omitted of doing good," she went on, her voice faltering a little, as it had certainly not faltered in her dream, "through thoughtlessness, or because they have not occurred to you. Think of the time you have spent on the enjoyment of mere worldly delights, on your garden, on your purely secular reading, with no thought of serving your Master."

The Infidel did not look conscience-stricken.

"Well?" he said simply.

"Compared with other men, even professed Christians, your life appears noble. I have heard of your model dwelling at Barnwood——"

"Oh! that is simply a business speculation," he interrupted quickly. "I expect to make ten per cent. on my capital. I believe in a good investment, like your husband. The only difference between us is that I like to indulge my sympathies at the same time, and pick my investments more carefully in consequence; but pardon me interrupting you. Please go on."

Angela felt less inspired than ever, but she clung to the argument of her dream.

"Comparison with other men does not justify us before God. He demands that we should be perfect, as He is perfect, and in His justice He must punish every falling short of that perfection."

"Well?" said Gabriel again, as she waited for him to become convinced of sin, and the polite tolerance of his manner did not change.

"If God is just He must punish every falling short of perfection, and you admit that, however good your life, you have done many things that you ought not to have done."

"Hundreds," he said laconically.

"Well! God has offered you a way of escape through His Son, and you have only to accept it. If you do not, your punishment is inevitable. Oh! let me beseech you to believe on Him, to throw your shortcomings on Him. Why don't you believe in Him?"

"That is not the question, Mrs. Presyllett," he said, smiling. "The question is, why I do not accept the view of the Creator, and His expectations, and His justice which you have been taught to hold. But do you not think, as I said before, that argument between us is rather a waste of time? You have a great many duties to perform, I know, and although I think it very kind of you, of course, to devote so much thought to me, still I don't like to think of taking up so much time which you might be giving to the sick and distressed. It cannot possibly lead to anything."

But Angela showed no sign of abandoning her mission. How could she do so, when she saw in him a soul on the brink of an eternity of torment?

"But I trust that, with God's help, it will lead to your eternal salvation. To the poor and sick I can give at best only a little temporary relief, but if, with God's help, I can show you the need of believing in Christ, my words will be the means in His hand of saving you from eternal ruin. Is not your very unwillingness to argue with me a sign that in your heart of hearts you believe that argument must end in your conviction? Is it not that you are afraid to lose a pleasant belief which frees you from any feeling of responsibility to God, and which leaves your own intellect the final criterion of truth?"

Gabriel smiled grimly, and shook his head.

"I am only afraid of robbing you of a pleasant belief, Mrs. Presyllett, a belief which enables you to know that you are right without argument, and assures you of a grand reward after death for holding your views in spite of the fact that they are illogical and irreligious. You must really not come here to debate any more. Apart from its uselessness, your visits will soon be commented on, and expose you to unpleasantness. Village society is horribly censorious."

"I have no care for village opinion when it would prevent me doing my Maker's work," she said, with her jealous pride of independence.

"And it never occurred to you to wonder whether *I* have any care for village opinion?"

"I thought that you were above making yourself a slave

to the opinions of others," she said dubiously; and her speech was pleasant flattery to him.

But he persisted in his determination to stop the visits which he found so disturbing.

"I never let the opinions of others deter me from doing what I think to be right," he said quietly, "but you must remember, Mrs. Presyllett, that I have expressed nothing but disapproval of your visits. As means to my conversion to Christianity, they are useless; as an opportunity of proselytising you to my belief, I cannot accept them without the sanction of your husband. If you will pardon me telling you the blunt truth, I do not think that it is quite advisable for a young and beautiful woman to visit a man of whom she knows so little. You may despise the ordinary rules of conduct, but it is only because you attach an importance, which I do not, to a certain code of laws contained in a certain book. You must remember that I look for a certain amount of inspiration in all laws that have ever been created, and only despise them when I find them inconsistent with my belief that there is but one Creator of everything, of etiquette as well as self-sacrifice and transcendental morality, of human impulse and human nature as well as of asceticism."

He kept on talking in pity for her, and regretted that he had spoken so bluntly. For a flush of shame had swept to her neck and then left her perfectly pale.

He had been counting on her piety protecting her from the full force of his condemnation, but his words had stabbed deeply at the modest woman beneath the marble crust, and before his decisive enunciation of right and wrong all spiritual support left her, she forgot the direct inspiration which she vainly thought had led her to the Infidel's conversion, and stood naked in her own sight as a woman who had acted indiscreetly.

She rose abruptly from the rustic seat and stepped dizzily towards the house.

"I am sorry that I came, if you think it wrong of me," she said in a cold hard voice; and Gabriel's trembled a little with pity for her as he tried to lessen her regret, assuring her that he understood the motive which actuated her visit.

In the middle of a sentence he stopped abruptly, and sprang forward to catch her in his arms. For Angela's life of devotion, with its constant toil and scant food, had left her too little strength to bear the shock of a sharp human emotion, and she had fainted.

He had to carry her a dead weight in his arms to the seat from which she had risen, and a hundred mad impulses of passion and regret for his brutality swept over him as he held her.

Why could he not kiss back colour into her marble cheeks, telling her that he loved and honoured her, and that only his love had made him cruel?

Her eyes opened as they reached the seat.

"Wait here and I will fetch you some water," he said in his ordinary quiet practical voice. "You have fainted; the sunshine has been too strong for you, I am afraid. Let me put my coat under your head, and then you can lay it back more comfortably."

He turned, in his white shirt-sleeves, towards the house, and in his excitement had almost reached the open French windows before he saw that they were blocked by the gaunt figure of Canon Presyllett, who was staring across the lawn at his wife, with a face livid with passion.

"Hound!" he hissed between his clenched teeth as Gabriel approached; and the muscular Infidel pushed him unceremoniously out of his way to enter the house.

"Don't be a fool," he said in his quick decisive tone. "Mrs. Presyllett has fainted. Run upstairs and get a pillow out of one of the rooms for her head, while I fetch a glass of water."

## CHAPTER XXIII

CANON PRESYLLETT had hurried straight from the Rectory to "The Barn" in a white heat. In his wife's frank note he saw only the artifice of a woman who, finding herself discovered, makes a pretence of candour. She saw, no doubt, that her close intimacy with Lyne would soon reach her husband's ears in a little place like Windlehurst, and had tried to be beforehand with gossip by pretending that she was about to meet him for the purpose of undertaking his conversion. He began to ascribe to the sinister influence of the Windlehurst Infidel everything in Angela's character which displeased him. Lyne must have encouraged her to thwart his every wish. Perhaps half her pretended missions had been merely a blind to enable her to see more of the unbeliever. The jealous clergyman was ready to believe anything.

Just by the church he met Squire Gateacre in his dogcart, and, in his eagerness to verify what the old maids had told him, stopped the vehicle to talk.

"Does my wife ever meet that fellow Lyne at your house?" he asked abruptly; and the Squire reddened. In the presence of his Rector he was rather ashamed of his friendship for the rationalist, and was glad to say that Mrs. Presyllett had never met him at the Hall.

"They knew each other before your wife became Mrs. Presyllett," he said, anxious to free himself from the charge of having introduced them, now that the fact of their acquaintance seemed from the Canon's manner to be exasperating him. "Why, I remember Lyne saying, when your engagement to Miss Gaydon was first mentioned between us, that she had just announced it to him. It was on the Barnwood Road, on the day of Barnwood Cattle Fair."

The Squire flushed again as he remembered the suggestion which he had made to his friend on that occasion, and a horrible doubt entered his head that Gabriel might have taken the suggestion to heart *after* the marriage.

"Do you think that they are too much together?" he asked in his straightforward way; and the clergyman, in his dread of a public scandal, forced himself to speak more calmly.

"I do not approve of my wife, or indeed of any friend of mine, knowing a man of that stamp at all. Mrs. Presyllett thinks she may be able to alter his views, but I am of opinion that it is best to leave such men alone. I find that he has been persuading my wife to read his profane books, and am on my way to remonstrate with him."

"Oh! I am surprised to hear it of Lyne," said the Squire. "He seemed to me quite anxious not to disturb your wife's faith, when he has spoken about her, I mean. I have never seen them together."

"And so your friend the Atheist takes an interest in my wife's faith, and discusses her with you, does he?" said the Canon; and his keen glance made the Squire feel uncomfortable. He was glad to stumble through an explanation and get away.

The Canon went on his way, with all his doubts intensified, and apparently confirmed. His wife had spoken on the previous day of her visit to Lyne as if he were a complete stranger, and, weeks before she was married even, she had known the man well enough to tell him of her proposed marriage. The day of Barnwood Cattle Fair! It came back to him in a flash that it was the very day on which his wife had shown the first sign of hesitation with regard to their proposed partnership, the day on which she had upbraided him for his ownership of the rookery at Barnwood. Had the man been in her complete confidence even then; and if so, why had she agreed to the partnership? Was it a deeply laid plot to make him look ridiculous? Was her complete absence of passion explained by the fact that she had a passion for Lyne? He was, indeed, ready to believe anything.

His doubts only increased his passion for her. While he

had felt sure of her residence under his roof, he could control himself; but with the fear of losing her altogether, he could no longer disguise from himself the intensity of his lust. He did not try to disguise it. Any lapse from purity was excusable, he told himself when he could give it thought, in order to prevent the terrible sin of a woman leaving her husband. The Angel and the Beast joined forces against an outside foe.

This was the mood in which he reached the author's cottage, and finding the front door wide open, he strode inside at once, and after glancing into the empty study, pursued his way to the French windows of the drawing-room, there to catch sight of his wife in the Infidel's arms.

Against Lyne he felt little real anger. He could not understand a man undeterred by thoughts of supernatural punishment curbing his passion in any way, and if the unbeliever had deliberately made love to his wife, it was only what he had expected of him. But his wife! She had deceived him utterly. She was not the saint that he had married, and who had presumed to consider herself holier than her lord and master. She was frail and human.

Even in his indignation, there was a certain amount of satisfaction for him in the revelation. If he had loved her as worldly men love their wives, he would have been heart-broken by the downfall of her character; but her character he had never loved or appreciated. He had married her as a chattel, and he was possessed at once by a dread lest her value should have deteriorated for him from that point of view, and a fierce anger with her for causing his dread.

Had matters gone so far, he asked himself, that his continued possession of his chattel had become impossible? If he had stood alone, he could have forgiven her any offence rather than lose her; and his very want of real love for the woman, the sheer brutality of his passion, would have enabled him to pose as the divinely forgiving husband; but the divinely forgiving husband can never escape looking rather ridiculous and pitiable in the eyes of society, and the Canon's pride prevented him thinking for a moment of occupying the position. His dread was chiefly due to the fear lest society should demand his surrender of a possession he valued—a possession



which he had only gained through much mental argument both with his soul and with Angela, and which it would be difficult for him to replace. What other beautiful woman could he induce to marry him, on the only terms which made marriage permissible to him; and how could he be sure that his conscience would permit him to repeat his experiment if Angela were lost to him? Only by an unusual combination of coincidences had he been able to wrest from Deity a supposed sanction for his act, and the coincidences would not be repeated. It was very hard on him when the marriage had just been opening out to him a vista of justifiable gratification, and he was anxious to find that his wife had not passed beyond the line of forgiveness, had not made it impossible for him to forgive her, that is, with the approval of society.

When Gabriel Lyne had passed him to fetch water from the house, he did not think of obeying his command. He did not believe that his wife had fainted. The Infidel's statement was for him simply a clever impromptu to explain the position in which he had found them, and as soon as Lyne was gone, he strode across the level lawn with the sun in his eyes, preparing a stern denunciation of the woman who had deceived him.

But when he reached the rustic seat where she was reclining, he was relieved to find that the statement was true. There was no disbelieving the perfect pallor of the girl's face, or the deep rims under her closed eyes. She had not opened them since Gabriel had left her, and was perfectly unconscious of her husband's presence.

When she caught the sound of his steps on the grass, she thought that it was the unbeliever returning, and opened her eyes slowly, half afraid of letting her own meet his; and a look of relief came into her face when she caught sight of her husband in his place. Her lips had been moving in silent prayer, and it seemed to her as if her prayer had been answered.

At the sight of her evident illness the Canon's stern expression had melted into an expression of relief like hers, and, in his dread of losing her, a new resolve came to him suddenly

with the discovery that the supposed embrace at least was satisfactorily accounted for.

His manner became full of the practised gentleness which he showed with the sick in the parish when he was obliged to visit them, and he smiled when his eyes met his wife's. Her beauty made his dread of losing her conquer even his temper. It conquered his curiosity too. Better know nothing, he said to himself, than learn that which would compel him to relinquish his wife. He would safeguard himself with ignorance.

Gabriel had been alarmed, for his beautiful Nun's sake, by the Canon's unmistakable anger as he passed him; and when he returned with water and smelling-salts, to find that the clergyman had joined his wife on the lawn, his heart sank.

He was relieved to find them talking amicably together, the Canon full of condolences, uttered in a tone that was quite amiable, if rather studied and artificial. Even to Gabriel himself the Canon showed a cold politeness, which surprised him after the short scene at the French windows. He tried to see the wife's face, to tell from it whether this apparent peace was a true one; but Angela's eyes avoided him, and she looked at her husband only. It was the Canon who took the glass of water from Gabriel's hand and held it to her lips.

He apologised to the Infidel for the trouble which they were giving him.

"I am afraid that my wife is too zealous for her strength," he said; "this evangelical work of hers is too tiring for her."

Gabriel replied in the same tone, and smiled a little to think of the hostile passage which had just taken place between them.

"I was just persuading her that her zeal is thrown away upon me," he said, "that the differences between your view and mine are too fundamental for a cursory exchange of opinions. Would you like me to walk over to the Rectory and bring back a conveyance for Mrs. Presyllett? The drawback of this place is that I have no stable."

It was Angela who answered, but she addressed her words to the Rector.

"There is not the least need for Mr. Lyne to give himself

further trouble," she said quickly. "I feel quite better, and can walk easily with the help of your arm. Mr. Lyne is very kind, but there is really no need for the carriage."

She rose as she spoke and took her husband's arm. She seemed to Gabriel very anxious to get away from him, and he struggled, poor fellow, to find satisfaction in the fact that she had no further need or wish for his help. The agreement between husband and wife surprised him. He had been telling himself, especially when the excited Canon appeared, that his beautiful Nun had paid her visit without her husband's knowledge, and that he would view her act with suspicion and anger. Gabriel had been steeling himself to witness an angry scene, in which the girl would appeal to him for vindication of her motives, in which it might be necessary for him to remind her of the allegiance she owed her husband, an allegiance which she seemed always anxious to disclaim.

The scene would have been painful to him, and have necessitated a great deal of self-control on his part; but it would not have chilled him as this perfect agreement did, which left him absolutely unnecessary to her. He struggled in vain to feel glad that the meeting between husband and wife had turned out so differently from what the Canon's manner and his knowledge of his character had led him to expect. It was much better that she should find such satisfaction in her husband's society, but his heart rebelled in spite of himself against her sudden coldness.

She appeared suddenly to share the Canon's personal dislike to him, and her eagerness to leave the place was very apparent. All the friendliness and candour which had marked their previous talks had disappeared instantly, and she seemed unwilling to address him or to let her eyes meet his.

Even when he had followed them across the lawn and through the house to the door, and Angela, leaning on her husband's arm, held out her hand to him, her manner was very formal.

"I am sorry that I have taken up so much of your time, Mr. Lyne," she said, with eyes still averted. "I think that you are right in saying that argument between us is inadvisable, but I shall always pray that you may see the truth."

The Canon bowed stiffly, and Gabriel turned back to the lonely house with a sigh.

"So that is the end of it," he said aloud. "Well! I ought to be quite satisfied. It is what I have been trying for. She will never see me again."

Then he rolled himself a cigarette, and walked up and down the low-ceilinged study, reasoning with himself.

"You are a poor fool," he said, apostrophising himself. "You have decided that she must keep to her husband, and are sorry that she is quite willing. You want her to be happy, and are sorry that they seem better friends than you imagined."

He puffed away at his cigarette, wondering what had given him the idea that the Canon and his wife were so completely at variance with one another, and struggling to reconcile himself to the apparent fact that they were not.

"What a bigoted fool I am getting," he said aloud again, "to think that a fellow cannot make a good husband unless he holds opinions like mine. Mrs. Gateacre knows more than I do."

Meanwhile the amiable couple walked along the deserted lane in almost complete silence. After thanking the Canon for coming so opportunely to escort her home, Angela volunteered no remark; and the Canon, although he had much to say, had decided to keep it until they reached the house. It was always easier for him to maintain a lofty mental attitude in his study, with the assistance of his stained-glass window and incense, and the clergyman was feeling strong in the knowledge that he could assume his lofty pedestal once more. The strength of which his wife had robbed him by her constant appeals to a creed purer than his own, had come back now with the knowledge that, judged by any ideal of conduct at all, he could indict his wife's actions. If she had done nothing worse—and he was beginning to think that he had interfered in time—she had concealed from him her acquaintance with Lyne previous to their marriage, and must shrink abashed before him when he confronted her with the fact.

The knowledge gave him a sense of spiritual superiority and command over her which he had not felt since their marriage, and he thanked God, who in His marvellous wisdom had

allowed his wife to commit a fault in order to make her amenable to her husband's proper control.

As they crossed the wooden bridge over the river, Angela drew her arm from his, saying that the air had taken away all her weakness ; but the Canon insisted on her replacing it, and his wife obeyed quite meekly.

The Canon smiled complacently at the thought that already her guilty conscience was making her amenable to his wishes.

"When you have taken your things off, I should like to speak to you in the study, dear," he said when they entered the house together ; and Angela nodded.

Canon Presyllett thought that he saw timidity in her glance as she did so, and the fact encouraged him.

When, five minutes later, Angela, looking very pale and tired still, entered the room, the incense was burning, and the clergyman wore his most spiritual air.

The place had never quite lost its effect upon her, and once more she felt a sense of awe in his presence, akin to the feeling which she had felt when first she entered the room. Her bearing had lost the bold fearlessness which had distinguished it more and more of late as she lost faith in the Rector's perfect devotion to his proclaimed creed, and she seated herself at once in the chair he handed her.

The Rector remained standing under the window.

"I waited till we were home," he said in his pulpit voice, which once more impressed her as it had done in the days before she had learnt to associate it with selfish casuistry, "before asking you a few questions with regard to your relationship with Lyne."

The pale face flushed a little, and, encouraged by its expression, the Canon proceeded with more calmness and sweetness of manner than he had shown her since her first sign of opposition to his authority.

"Do not think that I claim any right as your husband to demand your confidence, although I might surely expect perfect openness from one who has promised to be my wife in the eyes of the world. I speak rather as your spiritual pastor, one who would guard you from any danger into which your youth, and perhaps your over-confidence, may have delivered you.

I speak as a minister of God, who would guide you as one of my Master's lambs into the path of safety, so that at the last you may be gathered into the fold with those who have conquered all the sinful leadings of the flesh, and triumphed in the strength which the Master alone can give. Believe me, dear, I have no desire to blame you, no desire to remind you of the unhappiness which any fault of yours must cause to myself. I only want to help you in any temptation which may have beset you, and give you what help is in my power. As your pastor, I urge you to put aside all deception and tell me everything."

"I have not deceived you. I have nothing to tell," she said; but her words did not ring true, as they usually did. Her hands clasped and unclasped nervously, as they always did when she was ill at ease.

"Of course I cannot compel you to make me your confidant," he went on, content to waive the question of his authority for the sake of effect, when he had the proofs of her deception to confront her with. "But I assure you that your duty to our Master demands that you should accept the help He offers you through me."

"But I have nothing to tell," said Angela again, still moving her hands monotonously; and the Canon produced his first piece of evidence.

"Is it not true, then, that you have allowed that enemy of your Master, that proclaimed unbeliever, to persuade you to read his pernicious attacks on our holy religion?"

The effect surprised him. A look of relief passed over the girl's subdued face, and she answered with something of her old animation and courage.

"Oh! Mr. Lyne did not urge me to read his books. He absolutely refused to lend them to me without your express sanction. He looks upon us, of course, as really man and wife. He has done all he could to dissuade me from reading his works, and I was obliged to order them for myself from Crawford."

"Why did you keep it a secret from me?"

"I had no intention of doing so. This morning was our first meeting since I ordered or intended to order them."

"And you expected to learn truth from them?"

"Some truth, doubtless. I do not think that they will change my faith, if that is what you fear."

"I fear that you are indulging an unwise curiosity, and that it would most probably have harmful effects," he said, maintaining his calm pastoral dignity with more difficulty as her manner became more assertive. "When do you expect the books?"

"To-morrow."

"I must advise you most earnestly to countermand your order."

"I am afraid that it is too late," she said weakly, her unusual suggestion of a mere material difficulty showing that her own judgment had ceased to be an infallible guide to her. "The books are paid for, and were specially ordered for me."

"Then you must please let me take possession of them when they arrive."

She hesitated a moment, the play of her delicate fingers becoming more marked than before.

"Thank you," she said meekly; "I should like you to keep them until—until God has shown me whether I ought to read them."

"That is right, dear," he said, encouraged by her ready submission. "I doubt not what the decision of our Master will be, if you really seek His will in the matter, not indulging your own wish, or listening to those arguments of the heart which so easily deceive us into thinking them Divine utterances, but seeking it humbly in His word, and listening to the advice of His ministers. If you ask my opinion——"

"But you do not know what the books are, because you do not know what Mr. Lyne is. Your idea of him as a bad man is altogether unjust."

The Canon smiled sublimely.

"My dear child, you must remember that you are very young to form an estimate of any man. No doubt Mr. Lyne is a very handsome man, and has mental ability of a high order. How persuasive he can make himself, I know from sad experience. He is quite undermining my influence with Gateacre. The Evil One chooses his servants as well as our Master, and

gives them gifts to enable them to entangle men's souls with their sophistries. No doubt those gifts appeal very strongly to a girl like yourself. His flattering tongue, his pleasing attentions are very dangerous."

Angela's face flushed, and she half rose from her chair.

"You misjudge Mr. Lyne altogether," she said hotly. "He has never made the slightest attempt to influence me; he has made every effort to prevent me talking to him, for fear that he should weaken my faith; he has never flattered me, he has never paid me attentions. I think that he hates and despises me."

The uncontrollable excitement of her defence, which could not but convince him of the Infidel's innocence, made the Canon decide on a bold question.

His inspired eyes met hers calmly and searchingly.

"And still you have given him your love, Angela?"

She recoiled as if he had struck her, and drew herself to her full height, confronting him. The flush had died from her cheeks, leaving them deathly pale. Her eyes were full of startled consternation.

She stood as if transfixed for a moment, her pale lips moving, but making no sound.

He saw that she was struggling to deny the accusation, and spoke still in his calm gentle voice.

"Remember that whatever you say to me, dear, God knows the truth. He reads the secrets of all hearts."

Her eyes dropped under his gaze. The pallor of her cheek turned suddenly to flame, and sinking back in her chair, she buried her burning face in her hands, and burst into tears.



## CHAPTER XXIV

POOR Angela! It seemed hard that she should have been made so honest. Other women, if men may believe their sweethearts, can give their whole heart to a man, and remain quite unconscious of the fact until the man has justified their confession by demanding it. Perhaps Angela owed her singularity to her constant habit of self-analysis. Her finger was for ever on her moral pulse, waiting for the evidence of sin. And she had always accepted the fact that love between man and woman was sin. The mother who had been her ideal in youth had loved, of course, but her passion had been etherealised to her daughter by the fact that, before Angela herself was old enough to think, it had become love for an angel. Mrs. Gaydon would confess that God had taken her husband to save her from the sin of loving a creature better than the Creator, and had thus instilled into her daughter's mind the fact, which she saw exemplified everywhere afterwards, that human love interferes with that self-centredness which she unavoidably associated with holiness. Then, like the Canon, she identified purity with her natural distaste for physical contact with mankind. She did not understand how physical contact is purified and made holy when it is the sincere expression of a pure and holy emotion. Cecile had cultivated in her the morbid sensitiveness which she had herself in this respect. In spite of their affection the two girls rarely kissed, and never embraced. The kiss which the Canon had given her in the vestry, after the empty wedding, had made her feel physically sick, and the same sensation seized her now whenever he touched even her hand. This distaste for physical contact was purity in her eyes, and suddenly she found herself finding pleasure in it. Gabriel Lyne had taken her in his arms, and instead

of instinctively shrinking from him, she had felt a thrill of pleasure, a sense of strength and protection, which gave her a new momentary content. She had enjoyed it for a moment, only to be overcome with horror of herself in the next, when she realised what it meant, when she saw through half-closed eyes his eager sympathetic face bending over her, and thought vaguely—the idea passing from his mind to hers no doubt by a species of unexplored mental telegraphy—that he might kiss her, knowing that if her conscience revolted, her inclination would not.

Perhaps Gabriel had unconsciously prepared her mind for this realisation by his scruple of propriety. She had been thinking of him as a mind, a soul, in which she was deeply interested, and he had reminded her that he was a man and she a woman, and that her interest in him would be taken by the world to be due to the fact. She had found herself involuntarily asking, with a sense of shame, whether it might not be partly true. The conviction that her supposed dream-inspiration had been no inspiration at all, but merely a freak of her imagination, had prepared her for the self-questioning, as the questioning prepared her for the realisation of her love.

It was a terrible downfall for her. She had been so jealous of her holiness, her superiority to all the degrading emotions which she saw in others, and now in a flash of enlightenment, at the touch of a man's arm, she found herself convicted in her own eyes of sin—sin against God, against modesty, for her love had been given unsought, and she had not even the excuse of ordinary women who are wooed and won; a sin against society, for in the eyes of society she was the wife of another man.

The last consideration did not appeal to her. She barely considered it, for the verdict of society she had always despised, and her marriage was only a form. But the offence against conscience and pride filled her with an overwhelming sense of degradation.

She was too honest to deceive herself. She could see quite plainly that she had loved Gabriel from the moment of their meeting in the fever-stricken house at Barnwood. Her com-

plete dependence upon his judgment, her faith in all his decisions, and her assurance of his goodness, which was strong enough to resist the shock of her after-discovery when she found him the Infidel of Windlehurst, explained themselves. It was absurd to think that the few words he had spoken, the slight evidence she had of his philanthropy, could have inspired her faith. It was that his face, his voice, his whole bearing had appealed directly to her heart. Her trust was founded not on reason at all, but on sheer emotion; and that emotion, she saw clearly, was what people called "love." What else could be the inexplicable emotion which at moments filled her with a sense of delicious happiness, until the considerations of conscience and pride made her mentally writhe under the conviction that she was sinning against God and her womanhood in not only loving, but giving her love unsought? It was an emotion which triumphed over all her most cherished convictions. She could no longer admit that her opinions were of necessity right and infallible, if by so doing she made the Infidel inferior to herself; she must worship his character although, by all the canons of her creed, his every thought was unholy and wrong. She believed in him more than she believed in herself, in his goodness more than in her own.

Love was indeed very different from what she had always imagined it—so different indeed, that she would not have recognised it had it not been for that horrible degrading inclination for his caresses, that horrifying sense of pleasure and content which swept over her when she found herself, after her momentary unconsciousness, in his arms.

Even while conscience and pride cried out to her that her content was degrading, she could not *feel* that it was so, as she had felt degraded by the Canon's kiss.

If her pride, and the natural maidenly shame she felt at giving her love unsought, had not bulwarked her old ideas of the sinfulness of love, if the artificial conscience created in her by her training in an ascetic creed had stood alone to withstand this new enlightenment of what love really meant, love might have triumphed over her teaching, and rather than degrade the emotion which she could not *feel* to be impure, she might have lost faith in her teaching; but with maidenly

shame on its side, the creed conquered, and she covered herself with degradation.

She lost faith in every impulse which had made her so eager for the Infidel's conversion, and in the supposed encouragement of her God she saw now only the machinations of the Evil One. Her dream, as practical results had clearly shown, owed nothing to inspiration; and she told herself that only the personal magnetism of the unbeliever himself had drawn her to his cottage, after he had shown her clearly at the first interview that her arguments could not influence him. She had been stubborn and self-confident. The Canon had been right, when she thought him so very wrong, in warning her against her enterprise.

As her supreme trust in her own judgment departed, her faith revived in the professional exponent of her creed, the creed against which she had sinned. How did she know that the Canon was ever wrong in his enunciations of duty? She had never thought him more wrong than when he opposed her visit to the Windlehurst Infidel, and the result had more than justified his opposition. How could she be sure even that he was wrong when he gave the death-blow to her faith in his judgments by selling the rookery at Barnwood instead of building a model dwelling in its place? The result had been to leave him undisturbed in his spiritual work, while the model dwelling was to be built after all, as the mere outcome of a commercial enterprise, by one more fitted for the undertaking.

The realisation of new facts in life was hurrying Angela rapidly along the path of spiritual progress, which all earnest and thoughtful seekers after holiness must travel.

They realise first that an action is not necessarily right or wrong because they think it right or wrong; that their judgment is simply the result of their training. In England they fall back upon what is supposed to be the supreme source of their teacher's inspiration, the Bible, and instead of accepting the tortured reading which has come to them through others, take its inspiration direct for themselves.

The second step is when they realise that their own honest reading of the infallible code is not necessarily infallible. They

are faced by the fact that texts, like statistics, can prove anything; and they see all around them men forming judgments entirely opposed to their own, and still justifying them by the same code. A thousand sects claim authority for their tenets direct from the Bible, and find in it authority for denouncing each other. Given that the Bible is infallible, its infallibility becomes useless for want of an infallible mind to read it.

Here is the parting of the ways which comes in the path of the earnest Christian, and it sends one half seeking for an infallible leader to read the infallible creed, and the other half trudging along like Gabriel Lyne without infallibility at all.

With an equal desire for belief in what is true, one man subordinates his judgment to that of another man or group of men as human as himself; his final goal, if his honesty and logic hold out, is the Church of Rome: another realises that absolute truth is not to be found, and contents himself with following always what appears to his own intellect the truest thing. He may still admit the Bible as an infallible guide, although he admits fallibility in his reading of it—an admission which luckily prevents him damning everybody who does not hold exactly the same view as himself; or he may conclude, with Gabriel Lyne again, that an infallible book without an infallible mind to read it is an absurdity, inconsistent with any known creation of the one Creator's, and traceable back to man's lust for that absolute truth which he desires chiefly in order to know absolutely that he is better than his neighbours. Even at this point a man is not necessarily a non-Christian. The final consideration which had made Gabriel Lyne label himself an Infidel was the conviction that the prejudice in favour of the name "Christian" is simply a remnant of that lust for infallibility which the Creator has not chosen to grant, and which on that very account became to him an irreligious and harmful thing to be lusted after.

Angela, of course, was still searching for absolute right and wrong. The idea of contenting herself with comparative truth, as we do in art, science, and every department of the Creator's work except morals, had never occurred to her, and would have

shocked her if it had. She had reached the point when her own reading of the infallible code ceased to be necessarily right, when all the faith, prayer, and Divine help which she could get could not prevent her mistaking the path of duty; and she fell back on the authority nearest to her hand, of her Church, and of its minister, the Canon.

For the first time since the disappointing honeymoon, she was glad that she had entered into her spiritual partnership with him. She had more or less consciously done so, it will be remembered, as a refuge from her own heart—from those vague dreams of romance which instinctively tinge the thoughts of every pure woman, whether they are welcomed or repressed; and now she found the refuge very necessary. Once more a doubtful enunciation of the Canon's was justified by the results.

Gabriel Lyne had said more than once that it was only the fact of her marriage which made him unwilling to influence her views. If she had not been married, he might have made her believe very much like himself. His views were wrong, of course. She tried to persuade herself that it was her love which had blinded her to their falseness, but she had no faith in her strength to resist his arguments. She felt that he could mould her like clay, that she trusted his wisdom more than her own, and worshipped the goodness in him that owned to no incentive in the love of her Christ. If she had not been married he might have converted her from her faith, and then when her views were like his, he might despise her less, and begin to care for her perhaps. Angela flushed at the thought, and tried to thank Heaven for the protection which her marriage had given her. Her doubts about it became to her only the outcome of a sinful independence, the independence which had led to her love; and she was prepared, in her complete loss of trust in herself, to deliver herself up in future blindfold to the authority of her husband, and take his enunciations as the real voice of God. Of course a text occurred to her to justify her. It was one of which the Canon himself was very fond.

Nothing could be more complete than her subjection as she sat in the cathedral-toned study, with its tinge of incense,

hiding her face for shame before the question her husband had asked and which she dared not answer.

He was very sweet and gentle with her. It came easily to him when he found her no longer self-assertive. Even the jealousy with which her tacit confession inspired him was overbalanced by his relief at finding that Lyne did not share her passion. His wife's ascetic dress and devoutness made it easy for him to believe that the man had only been repelled by her efforts to convert him, while Angela's affections had been seduced by his good looks and splendid figure.

With no opposition from the Unbeliever, it would be easy enough to prevent any further meetings between them, and to transfer her hopeless passion to himself. He was still trying to understand the passion which a woman feels for one man because she loves him, by identifying it with the unholy passion he had himself for all women, because they were women ; and he actually promised good to himself from the fact that her love had been awakened, even though it was for another man. He looked upon it as an intervention of Deity on his behalf, to make his marriage what he had intended it to be.

He waited patiently for the first violence of her sobs to exhaust itself, and then came nearer to place his gaunt hand on her shoulder, with a pleasant sense of possession which he had not felt since the honeymoon.

"My poor child," he said in a low voice, the voice he always used to penitents, "I am so glad that I know, so that I can help you. You must tell me all about it, and let us see what practical means we can take to assist you, with God's help, to conquer your fault."

Poor Angela, still hiding her face, gave a short account of her meetings with the Infidel, beginning with the affair at Barnwood ; and she listened quite submissively when he told her that God was showing her how she had adopted the wrong sort of service for Him ; that she was taking to herself, in her pride, too many of the duties which He has allotted to men, and neglecting those which He has specially set apart for women. Her nursing of the sick and her charitable visits to the poor might continue, but her spiritual efforts to reclaim the rich by argument and denunciation must be suspended, and in their

place it would be well for her to devote her time more to those domestic duties which, however much her pride might revolt against them, have been specially chosen by Deity as means by which women may show their love of Him in patience and subjection. In his well-modulated pulpit voice, he told her a pretty little legend about a woman who was always praying for some great work to do for her Master, to whom one evening appeared an angel of light, who, after listening to the reiteration of her request, drew his finger across the dusty window-sill, and holding it up, soiled, to her wondering eyes, disappeared. And he wound up by saying that he had decided to send Mrs. Graeme away, and expected his wife to undertake the management of the house and darn his socks.

Angela listened to him as to the authority of the Church, and agreed submissively. She hated domestic duties, and her dislike made her ready to accept them as a religious duty.

She had lost faith in the leading of her conscience, and delivered herself over blindfold to the direction of the minister of God.



## CHAPTER XXV

ALTHOUGH more than a couple of hours had passed since his beautiful Nun had left the cottage with her husband, Gabriel had not succeeded in resuming the thread of his argument when another knock at the door sent him once more to open it. He was glad to see that his visitor was the Squire, who was putting a chain on the wheel of his dogcart, standing in the road.

The poor Squire had been thinking of what Canon Presyllett had told him all the way to Barnwood, and the more he thought about it the more uncomfortable it made him feel. He was telling himself that every effort he honestly made for the good of others had turned out disastrously. For the good of the parish he had advised the Rector to marry, and the consequence had been that he immediately took to wife a young girl to whom the marriage seemed unfair. To save her from the probable unhappiness his own action threatened to bring upon her, he had suggested to Lyne that he should make love to her, and thus prevent her sacrificing herself to a loveless union. And now it seemed from the Canon's words as if his advice, instead of preventing the marriage he deplored, had directed the Infidel's thoughts in the direction of the Canon's wife, and made him try and influence her mind, only when it was too late.

Under the circumstances, the conscience-stricken Squire felt that he could not do less than reason with Lyne upon the course he was taking.

Lyne looked upon the marriage tie in a less sacred and binding light than he did himself, no doubt. How could he help doing when his religious views were what they were? But Mr. Gateacre felt that he could appeal safely to his

sympathies, and touch him by pointing out the unhappiness which must undoubtedly come to the Rector's wife if he persisted in making an onslaught on her faith.

He had not much confidence in the Rector's own power to dissuade him from his purpose of making Mrs. Presyllett read his books. The men would only quarrel, he told himself; he felt bound to take the place of mediator; and he finished his business in Barnwood as hastily as possible, to drive back direct to "The Barn."

"Hope you are not busy, Lyne?" he said, looking up, red and breathless from his work at the wheel. "I thought I'd like a chat with you."

"Just what I was wanting," said Gabriel. "I have plenty of work to do, but don't feel like doing it. Come in."

He led the way through the house into the garden, as he had done when Angela came—so long ago it seemed now to him—and when they had seated themselves on the rustic bench he handed the Squire his pouch.

"Shall I make you a cigarette; or have you your pipe?"

The Squire had his pipe, and filled it slowly, wondering how he should begin. Gabriel seemed to be waiting to know what the special object of his visit was, and did not speak.

The Squire cleared his throat.

"You have been seeing more of Mrs. Presyllett lately—more than you had when you were at our house last?"

"Yes," said Gabriel, as he took the tobacco and began rolling himself a cigarette.

"And you are becoming interested in her?"

"Yes," said Gabriel again, and he struck a match.

"Well! I want to give you a word of advice, if you will let me, my boy," said the Squire, plunging into his argument. "I know you won't mind it from me, a man double your age. You see, I feel some responsibility about you. You remember what I said to you on the Barnwood Road, when the Rector was first engaged."

"You mean that you advised me to make love to another man's fiancée?" said Gabriel quietly.

"Yes, and I don't say that it was bad advice at the time;

but it is a different matter now that the girl is married, although you mayn't think so. Perhaps you think my respect for the marriage tie is old-fashioned like my Christianity."

"Oh no! I am not a revolutionary; but I don't see what you are aiming at. I have only seen Mrs. Presyllett twice since our last meeting, and all that passed between us was a little hostile argument on the subject of religion."

"Well! you must be taking greater interest in her to begin to argue with her," said the Squire, who, having once jumped to an opinion, could not easily relinquish it. "And the more you argue the more interested you will become. You may think that you have not a heart or passion like other men, but you will soon find you have; and if you will excuse me saying it, my boy, I think that Mrs. Presyllett is too pretty a woman for you to argue with safely. I should not talk like this to you if you were a Christian, and respected any law more than your own reason; but I know what it is when a man is a law to himself. I've tried it with tobacco. You smoke a little more than is good for you, and are feeling a bit sick with it, and you remember everything that has been said against tobacco and believe it. You are quite certain that it is foolish to smoke, and that you will never smoke again. Then next day the sickness has gone off, and you think it over again. It is not that your will's weak, but that you wonder whether your decision was a good one. Directly you feel hungry for a pipe, you forget what has been said against smoking, and only remember what there is to say for it, and in five minutes you are hard at it again."

"That is true," said Gabriel with a smile, recalling the experience, "but what the deuce has that to do with me and my arguments with Mrs. Presyllett?"

"A good deal, my boy, when you have no law higher than your own opinion. At present you are not in love with another man's wife, so you find it easy to say, Marriage is a very good thing, and we must not interfere with its sacredness, just as you found it easy to talk haughty-tauty about another man's fiancée when you did not happen to care a damn for her. But the very fact that you are interesting yourself sufficiently in Mrs. Presyllett to urge her to read your books,

shows that you are thinking more about her than you ought to do. Mind, I don't say that you know it, but you will be waking up some fine day and finding that you want her for yourself, and then it will be all up with your idea that the sacredness of marriage is a very fine thing. You will think of nothing but the arguments against it, as with the tobacco. I know, my boy."

"But Mrs. Presyllett believes in unbreakable laws," said Gabriel, with an assumed lightness. The conversation, which was so much more pertinent than the Squire imagined, interested him more than he cared to show.

The Squire shrugged his shoulders.

"She may not if you talk to her much, and—" (the Squire lowered his voice confidentially)—"as Rachel says,—and she has a pretty clear judgment about her own sex, you know,—one cannot trust the best woman in the world when she falls in love. Perhaps you think that a marble piece of piety like the Rector's wife couldn't fall in love, but the holiest woman living is human; and she is very young."

"I trust that she fell in love with her husband before she married him," said Gabriel, who had been trying to persuade himself of the fact after the scene in the garden; and he tried to repress a feeling of pleasure when the Squire answered hotly—

"I'll wager a thousand pounds she did not. Why, she had not seen him out of the pulpit; and though Presyllett is a good and holy man, still he is not much to look at, and you are."

"Thanks."

"Oh! I don't mean to flatter you," said the Squire. "You know as well as I do that you are pretty well as fine a fellow as they make them. Rachel says she cannot understand any girl seeing you without falling in love with you."

Gabriel laughed.

"Mrs. Gateacre will be making you jealous if she does not mind."

"I might be if she were as young as Mrs. Presyllett, and as little in sympathy with me as she seems to be with her husband, from all accounts. Do you know, he came round to

apologise to my wife for her talk about dress, and admitted that she was carrying on this crusade of hers against the well-to-do parishioners without his sanction. That does not look as if they were a very united couple at present."

"No," said Gabriel thoughtfully; "but you need not be afraid of my trying to make them less united. You will remember that I refused to try and win the lady's affection at your instigation, when she was merely engaged to marry Pressyllett. Is it likely that I should think it less dishonourable to do so when she is married? An infidel has a conscience, you know, Squire."

"He may have, when it is not tried. What I am afraid of is that you may become fond of the girl. You have shown plenty of interest in her from the first, and I do not know how it is, but I began to think of you two falling in love directly I met the Tomtits' niece. Although you are different enough in all conscience, still there is something akin between you."

"Perhaps you think us both fanatics," said Gabriel with a faint smile; he enjoyed the conversation, although he was not sure that it was prudent to continue it. Perhaps he would not have done so had he not been so sure that all chance of his meeting the Canon's wife was at an end. With the certainty before him of leaving Windlehurst and England in a few days, he could allow himself the melancholy pleasure of hearing his name coupled with that of the woman he loved.

"I don't know what it is," said the Squire persuasively, "but if I were you, Lyne, I really would leave the girl alone, and not try to influence her."

"I shan't have the chance," said Gabriel rather shortly and hopelessly, and something in his tone made the elder man look up. With an uncomfortable feeling that he was saying something his friend did not like, he had kept his eyes till now steadfastly fixed on the grass, and the young man's expression came as a revelation to him. It reminded him that Lyne's manner was unusually reticent.

"Look here, my boy, you are not deceiving me, are you?" he asked abruptly, his eyes searching Gabriel's face.

Gabriel flushed a little under his glance.

"Deceiving you? How?"

"You don't mean to say that you are in love with her already?"

The colour in the young man's clear skin deepened.

"I have not said so."

"But you are, for all that. Well! I am awfully sorry, my boy."

He held out his hand and grasped his friend's sympathetically.

"It is a pity that she has married Presyllett. I'm sorry; but since she has married him, it cannot be helped, can it?"

He asked the question anxiously.

"No, it cannot be helped."

"You ought to avoid seeing her."

"That is what I have tried to do all along. I am starting for the States in a week, when my book is done."

"That is right. We shall miss you at the Hall, but it is the best thing to do."

The Squire patted him approvingly on the shoulder, and felt pleasantly as if he were very successfully influencing the young man for good.

"There is one thing that I do not understand," he said after a pause. "Of course you are anxious to spread your opinions and all that, but do you think that it was quite wise to urge Mrs. Presyllett to read your books? I know that you think they are true, and have an idea that it is best for everybody to know the truth; but in this case, you must see that it would be awkward. It seems to me that Mrs. Presyllett is just the woman to become fanatical over any idea that appeals to her, and your books are damnably persuasive."

"Thanks," said Gabriel. "I saw all that, and I have done nothing but persuade the Rector's wife *not* to read my books. She wanted to master them in order to convert me to Christianity. In spite of my principles I advised her to leave them alone."

"Oh! I see," said the Squire; "she has been trying to convert you, as I said she would. It is just like her. But it is more dangerous work than she imagines. I am glad you are

a good fellow, and that you don't feel so much as other men. Now if I were in your shoes——”

“Perhaps I feel more than you think,” said Gabriel, “but I try to keep my feelings in hand. A man is not much of a man if he can't do that.”

The Squire knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

“Well! I shall have to be going now. Rachel will be wondering why I am late for lunch. We shall see you at the Hall before you go?”

“I will call and bid you and Mrs. Gateacre good-bye. I am afraid that is all I shall have time for.”

The Squire went away wagging his head.

“It is all very well for Lyne to say he feels,” he was thinking, “but he is all head. If he were like me, and cared for the girl half as much as I care for Rachel, he would want Christianity to keep him straight. His creed is all very well for a cold-blooded fellow born good like him, but for ordinary mortals you must have something more.”

If he could have glanced into the young man's heart, and seen the struggle by which his conquest had been gained over the love and passion that almost overmastered him!

Turning briskly out of the Hartle lane, by the church, the Squire caught sight of Angela's familiar figure a little farther along the road. She had been permitted by the Canon to pay the visit which he had been intending to do himself, when the Tomtits' revelation sent him back in hot haste to the Rectory. A dying woman in one of the hovels at the far end of the village wanted the Bible read to her, and the Canon, who wished to compose his neglected sermon, thought that it was work which might be delegated to one of the inferior sex.

Angela was still feeling weak after the emotion through which she had passed, and as he overtook her the good-natured Squire took pity on her tired air and pale face, and pulled up to offer her a lift.

She was usually so independent that he felt a little surprised when she accepted it gratefully. Her air was unusually repressed, and the fact that she seemed a little more human than usual encouraged the good man to give her some fatherly advice which he had been meditating since his interview with

Gabriel. He was glad to find himself feeling less afraid of the young lady than usual, and started almost as soon as she was seated by his side.

"I hear that you have been trying to influence my young friend Lyne," he said in his bluff way; and the pale face beside him flushed.

"Has he been telling you of my visits?"

Angela knew that the Infidel disapproved of them, and despised her for what she had done, but she was hurt to think that he should have made the fact public. The Squire's answer, while it made her flush more hotly, relieved her mind on the point.

"Your visits! My goodness, young lady, you do not mean to say that you went to his house?"

He had been thinking that Gabriel had met her in the village, and with his knowledge of the young man's affection for the girl, the news shocked him more than it would otherwise have done, and encouraged him to proceed with his lecture. If he did not speak to her pretty strongly, she might be visiting him again, and for the sake of Lyne's peace of mind as well as of the girl's he must certainly prevent that.

"I know that you think very little of public opinion, Mrs. Presyllett," he went on, when her silence answered his last question, "but I think you might take a word of advice from a man old enough to be your father. It really is not quite the thing for a young and pretty woman to go visiting everybody like this without an escort. I am sure that the Rector doesn't like it. You may despise my scruples because I can't back them up with a text, but I am quite sure there is a good deal of Christian sense at the back of them. You will excuse me speaking plainly, won't you, my dear? You are young enough to be my daughter, you know, and I can't help taking a fatherly interest in you. And I really can't help thinking that your visits to Lyne are rather unwise. It may be very well for yourself, but you must look at his side of the question. A man's human, you know, and you are a very pretty woman. I don't say that Lyne would insult you. Some men might do that, but he is a gentleman if he *is* an infidel."

Angela nodded, but did not speak. She could not trust her



voice even to say that all idea of visiting Lyne was at an end, and that she had recognised its un wisdom. The conversation fascinated while it hurt her, as the good man's well-meant blundering had fascinated Gabriel.

He took her silence for opposition, and saw in it only an unmoved determination to make fresh efforts for the Infidel's conversion, a scorn of the laws of propriety which opposed her proselytising efforts.

"But if Lyne is a gentleman," he went on, "that does not prevent his being human, and it would be hard on him if he fell in love with you, wouldn't it?"

He glanced round at her sharply as he urged this consideration, which must be so new to her.

"You seem to think it impossible," he went on, as she found herself still unable to speak, "but I could surprise you if I liked. If I told you that my young friend is more than half in love with you, that would make you look at your visits to him in another light, wouldn't it?"

She did not answer, but a look of startled incredulity put the Squire on his mettle.

"You may not believe it, Mrs. Presyllett, but I am sorry to say it is only too true. I have just come from Lyne's, and you can take my word for it. Why, he has admitted that—but it is not necessary that I should make any further use of his confidences. I should not have mentioned the matter at all if you had been like other women, but I can't stand by and see you devoting yourself to that man in your perfect innocence, because you think everybody is as holy and unimpressionable as yourself."

He was beginning to wonder, as he always wondered after he had done anything, whether he had acted wisely; but Lyne must be preserved from any further visits at all costs, he told himself.

"So you will not go to his cottage and argue with him any more, will you, Mrs. Presyllett?" he wound up in his fatherly way; and when Angela shook her head, he congratulated himself on having taken the right step to set everything right. How could he know, poor well-meaning blunderer, what his words meant to her?

He put her down at the hovel, and rode home wondering at her unusual silence and submissiveness.

"I suppose Rachel is right, and that she is toning down, and will get along with Presyllett as well as most wives do," he said to himself; "but, by Jove, I wish that I'd left the Rector alone, and not made him marry her, instead of Lyne. I don't know how it is, but every time I think of those two, they seem somehow made for one another."

## CHAPTER XXVI

MUCH to the Canon's surprise, the Abbess did not receive with her usual mechanical submission his announcement that she was to be pensioned and sent away. For the first time in his knowledge of her, she showed quite human emotion, appealing against the decision, and reminding the Rector of his promise that his marriage should make no difference to her position. Finally, when the good man remained hard and obdurate, with his usual impatience of any opposition to his plans which did not come from his conscience, she packed up her boxes in a fit of uncontrollable temper, declaring that she would sacrifice her pension rather than remain a day longer in a house where she had been treated so unjustly.

Her decision was so little unwelcome to her master, that he forgave her resentment and made no change in the provision he had made for her.

It gave him a sense of pleasing excitement to feel that a bar was removed to the closer companionship with his wife which he proposed to himself; and when Angela with her new submissiveness took up the burden of household management, he began to look upon the housekeeper's unexpected temper as another Divine intervention on his behalf to aid and mark approval of his subjugation of his wife's heart and will.

Only when that subjugation was complete would his actual celibacy become a real virtue in the eyes of his God, and he prayed devoutly and hopefully for it.

His attitude towards sin, which made him voluntarily increase the strength of its temptation, was diametrically opposed to that of Gabriel Lyne, because the principles which actuated the Infidel were to Canon Presyllett atheistical and irreligious. Gabriel considered no act sinful which was not humanly

harmful to himself or others, and as he did not want to harm himself or others, every sin was to be avoided by any means possible, quite apart from any question of the amount of credit he could claim for himself by avoiding it. With the churchman, on the other hand, sin was that which displeased God. To measure it by its probable natural effects in terms of earthly happiness to himself or others, was sheer atheism. It did not occur to him, for instance, that the particular sin he was considering could injure anybody. He had satisfied society by the aid of a marriage ceremony, and fondly imagined that by the same means he had taken away from his wife any real inclination to resent the sin, if he ever committed it. Natural delicacy he had none. His purity was a matter of conscience, an obedience to Divine will, like his abstention from champagne and apricots. He had no more natural repulsion against carnality than he had against the wine and the fruit. Nor did he credit his wife with any. It was not likely that he should, when he had not even the remembrance of a pure boyhood to help him in realising her purity. That the commission of the sin against God with which he consciously welcomed a moral struggle could be an outrage on his wife's delicacy too great and too horrible for words, never occurred to him. He saw nothing wrong or harmful in it, except that by committing it he would be displeasing Deity. The act therefore became nothing, the amount of his resistance to it everything, and to the Canon it honestly appeared that there was little to choose between committing the sin and avoiding it only because he was helpless and had no voice in the matter.

It was the direct outcome of his definition of sin, the only definition which necessitates an infallible code and supernatural rewards and punishments.

To Angela the housekeeper's summary retirement came as a severe test of her new submission. Perhaps it helped to strengthen the complete change which had taken place in her. For the management of a house was above everything distasteful to her, and its distastefulness helped her to believe that it was a duty. Had her service to God in the past been anything more than a pleasing of her own tastes, she asked herself,

in the complete distrust of herself which had come over her when she realised that she had been unable to distinguish between the dictates of God and the promptings of mere earthly sinful love in her heart. It seemed to her that even this self-questioning was useless, since she could not be sure of the truth of her conscience's answer. Thought itself had become useless. How was she to tell which thought came from God and which was the mere delusion of Devil or self? Honesty was nothing, since honesty had led Gabriel Lyne to reject Christ. A certainty of God's leading was nothing, since she had been so sure of it when the Devil led her into the path of temptation under the impression that she was going to save the unbeliever's soul. Gabriel would have told her that she must give up all idea of being absolutely right, and follow honestly the course that seemed rightest, even if it led her into occasional mistakes, recognised and adjusted afterwards; that the whole of life was an education in finding out what is true and what is right, and that at the end of it the Creator has not thought well to give any man absolute knowledge that he is better than his neighbours; but, alas! Gabriel could not offer himself as her guide, and the idea of an absolute right and an absolute truth was too firmly implanted in her mind for her to think, on her own initiative, of abandoning the search and struggle for it.

Thought seemed to her all the more dangerous because she found her mind constantly dwelling on ideas that the Infidel had suggested; and she tried desperately to close her mind to thought, and use all its energies in realising the person of her Christ, to keep Him always in her mind, and think only of His smile.

But her household duties, which puzzled her horribly, although they helped to keep her mind from spiritual thoughts, did not aid her in keeping before her the realisation of her Divine guide.

The sublime vision which the faithful have ever conjured up for themselves as guide and hope in a dark world, an incentive to heroic deeds, a consolation in the most terrible hours of grief and sorrow, bears a different face for every believer. The outline may be given by the New Testament

record; the details are reflected as on a mirror from the believer's own highest thoughts.

And in Angela's highest thoughts, Jesus had never smiled on domesticity. It had been easy for her, when entering the fever-stricken house at Barnwood, or even in changing her purpose out of deference to those who might suffer from her act, to gaze up to the sunlit sky, and see there the beatific vision of the God-man smiling His approval of her act. But when she was helping Jane to make the beds, or trying to decide what to order for dinner, her Christ seemed much farther from her, and her effort to picture his Divine approval was very hard.

She blundered miserably over her duties, and got no help from Jane or the cook, who both resented almost openly the housekeeper's departure. Her sudden departure had left the household disorganised, and the only result of Angela's attempts to assert her authority was that Jane gave notice.

It was the climax of a scene which Angela had felt to be painfully degrading. To argue with a sinner about his soul, to hold her own with Christian equanimity, and bear his abuse as a sacrifice to her Lord, was an experience which she took as a necessary part of the Christian life; but when the argument was about an unswept room, the exchange of words with a vulgar and spiteful girl seemed to her to drag her down to the maid's level, and to leave her without spiritual support for the disagreeableness of her position.

She felt that her martyrdom could not go on any longer, and donned her hat and cloak at once, to summon one of her aunts to take the management of the house. The Canon, who was away preaching, had urged her not to do so until she found the assistance really necessary; and now that it was very necessary indeed, she availed herself greedily of his implied permission. As only two days had elapsed since Mrs. Graeme's departure, he might, if she waited to consult him, consider that she had not given the experiment long enough trial, and Angela knew that she could not make him understand how intolerable the experiment had become to her. Already she was beginning to cling to the letter of the law, in distrust of the law-giver's omniscience. It was her duty

to do what the Canon *told* her, but she did not care to consider whether she was obeying his wish or not. Her submission had sown in her the first seed of that deceit which invariably accompanies submission to a human authority, and almost as invariably submission to a supernatural one. It had not accompanied Angela's in the old days.

She felt a keen sense of relief when she was out of the house, the crisp air of the dark garden and road exhilarating her, and quickening mind and pulse as it had done on that former evening when she had first asked the Canon's advice. She seemed to have lived through a great deal since then, and she began by reviewing the past, and trying to think what had made the great difference in her faith. Then she had been so confident, and now she felt like a waif, tossed about on an ocean of doubt, wondering what was right, and afraid to use her own judgment.

Her mind was the more active because all day she had either forgotten religious thought in the worries of management, or struggled against thinking.

The Canon had advised her, in his kindest and most considerate manner, to give all her time just at present to womanly duties, both on account of her physical weakness and as a spiritual help against the self-righteousness which had made her undertake Gabriel Lyne's conversion. It was the first time for two days that she had left the house, and the air intoxicated her. She felt that she had left a horrible prison, and only the reflection that she would soon have to return to it damped her uncontrollable feeling of pleasure in her freedom. Her mind indulged in a hundred queer thoughts. Was it possible that she had become a man's housekeeper? Perhaps it was true that managing homes was woman's best way of serving God, as the Canon seemed to think. Since Gabriel Lyne had made her see her own egotism and pride, and impressed upon her the fact that other people who acted quite differently from herself might be following just as honestly their idea of what was right, she had been more or less consciously weighed down by the thought of her difference from other women. Was it possible that she was right, and every wife and mother and home-loving woman in the world wrong?

If she was to give up all her own ideas and submit to those of the Canon, then she must believe that domesticity was the proper end of women. But if it were, why should she be housekeeper to the Canon? Why not be like other women altogether, and keep house for a man she loved, a husband for whom the service would be a pleasure? She could picture so well the sweetness of it now, and she felt no revolt against it. Was her absence of revolt a sin? No, for her spiritual leader had told her that it was pleasing to God for a woman to busy herself in household matters.

She clung to the infallibility of the Canon still, not because he appealed to her as infallible. The selfishness and self-pleasing behind his commands still forced itself on her mind, although she struggled to tell herself that her judgment was wrong, that the appearance of fallibility was sent by God to try her. She clung to his infallibility because she had nothing else to cling to. If she abandoned it she was indeed lost, left to the direction of her own feeble judgment, which she had learned to distrust.

It was her own judgment, her own idea, that domesticity was a hindrance to work for God, which had led her into her marriage with the Canon. If ordinary women were right, and God required her not to spend all her time in spiritual effort, but in mending socks and ordering servants, why had she taken this vow against ordinary marriage? She might just as well be like an ordinary woman throughout, and have children, and train and love them as her dead mother had loved and trained her.

As she passed through the dark village street, she paused to look in at an uncurtained window of one of the cottages which touched the path without the reserve of a garden front. A cheap lamp had been lighted within, and in its light Angela could see a humble interior, the furnishing poor and simple, but looking very peaceful and cosy in the combined glow of lamp and fire. At the bare but spotless deal table near the lamp, a man in his shirt-sleeves sat reading a big Family Bible aloud to his wife, whose hand lay on the table, clasped in his, while her foot rested on the rocker of a cradle. As Angela stopped to take in the scene, the baby in it must have



wakened from its sleep, for the mother rose to take it in her arms, and the man stopped in his reading to kiss mother and child.

It was a sweet peaceful picture of married happiness, and when Angela walked on unwillingly, in fear lest they should turn and see her peering face through the glass, there were tears in her eyes, she did not know why.

Was this woman less holy than herself? Did God disapprove of her love for husband and child? Had she been right in thinking her own life so far superior to this woman's in the eyes of God?

Why were human love and marriage wrong?

The question was a startling one, and at the first quick thought Angela heard in it the whisper of the Evil One seeking to make her waver in her God-commanded hatred of worldliness. She tried to utter a prayer for safety from temptation, but did she know that it was temptation? Might it not be the whisper of God telling her that her old ideas were wrong? Ideas were no longer Divine because she had held them, and her disapproval of human love and marriage had been bound up with her dislike for domestic duties, for her love of her own way, which her spiritual leader was denouncing now as girlish pride and arrogance.

Why was love wrong? The question fascinated her, although she was only dimly conscious of its importance to her creed, and only realised vaguely that her dependence upon the authority of the Canon was bound up with her answer. Only because she had found in the supposed leading of God the real prompting of the human love, had she lost faith in the guidance of her own conscience and judgment. If human love could be inspired by God, then her passion for the conversion of Gabriel Lyne might be right after all, and her own reading of God's will be better than that of her spiritual leader.

Of course she did not see her position with this clearness. Thought builds itself like the coral reef unconsciously, and the finished structure is planned by the Creator, never by the thinker.

Why was love wrong? The Squire's well-meant blunder

had taken from her old idea of its sinfulness all the support of her instinct. If Gabriel really loved her—and the thought thrilled her with a sense of delight which conscience could not suppress—then she could feel no shame in having responded to the claim his heart must have made on hers, even if his mouth had been sealed. The delicacy which had made it so easy for her to see sin in caresses, no longer assisted her. Her heart-sympathy with the man made it impossible for instinct to revolt against the thought of his touch. She wondered, as she left the lighted cottage window, whether it was possible that she could ever have seen anything coarse in the kiss which the villager had given to his wife and child.

It was quite possible. Her delicacy had been morbid, but the facts of life teach us very rapidly as we realise them, and love had taught her that it is only the kiss which is given for the kiss's sake alone that is coarse. She had not been able to imagine any other, but it was easy now, although she had never experienced the kiss of love.

The axiom of her creed was left without the support of her feeling; it was left also without the support of her reason, for the pleasant sense of superiority to other women, and the dislike to sordid household duties, which had bulwarked her belief in the past, were recognised now as selfish traits. If a woman must manage a house, then the mere fact of her loving husband and children could not interfere with her service of God. The love of a good man must assist her in recognising and following God's will. Angela could not help feeling that the constant companionship of Gabriel Lyne would help her to do God's service much more thoroughly. Even if he did not worship Christ—and perhaps she could show him the necessity of that if they shared a perfect confidence—how much had he not done already, by the few words he had spoken, to make her feel and wish to correct her egotism, her self-righteousness, her disregard of others.

The perfect companionship in the service of right which she had once looked forward to enjoying with Canon Presyllett seemed possible—but not with the Canon. Their methods of thought, their sympathies were so opposed, that companionship in the true sense of the word was out of question between

them. It was a matter of character, not of creed, and Gabriel Lyne—— She pulled herself up quickly. Surely a lifelong companionship with the man who saw things so clearly was too pleasant a thing to be anything but a sin.

But why? If an artificial, unsympathetic companionship with Canon Presyllett was right, why should the real companionship with another be wrong?

The Canon had scarcely been well-advised in handing over to his nominal wife the management of his home, for household management was to her the chief feature of marriage. The feature on which the Canon's mind was concentrated did not enter into her consideration at all, except in relation to its effects in the way of children. And the bearing of children, a vague subject on which her actual knowledge was the uncertain half-knowledge of a child, simply occurred to her as an increase in household duties, an extra temptation to the absorption in worldly thoughts and human emotions of that enthusiasm which she wished to give whole to the service of God.

To manage the Canon's house for him made her feel as if she were married to him; and if marriage in itself was right, then her empty union with the Canon, intended only as a protection against marriage, was useless. It was this association of domestic management with matrimony which had rendered the former so degrading and unbearable to her. She had accepted the task the Canon laid upon her, not because she was his wife, but because, as her spiritual guide, he had prescribed womanly duties, and these womanly duties lay nearest to her hand. She asked herself now why she should perform them for Canon Presyllett rather than for anybody else. The fact that he was a clergyman did not render the service one performed more particularly for God. Her incapacity only threatened to leave him less undisturbed in his spiritual efforts by domestic inconveniences than in the time of Mrs. Graeme. She was not serving God through His ordained minister; she was simply driving a faithful housekeeper unwillingly from her employment.

Angela's thoughts were still in a state of indefinite chaos, her mind full of questions to which she had found no answer when she reached Lilac Lodge.

Her aunts were out, attending the late harvest festival at Hartle, where the Canon was preaching; and she had to content herself with scribbling an urgent little note to be left with Susannah and given to them when they returned. She was not sorry to be left to the uninterrupted current of her strange thoughts, and she walked back again briskly, thinking them all the way.

At the end of the Hartle lane she stopped, and tried to see into the darkness with an expectation that was half hope and half fear; but, all unconscious of the mental tumult which he had brought into the girl's mind, Gabriel Lyne was in his cottage a mile away, working hard at his book, and promising himself that it would be finished that night, and allow him to leave Windlehurst and temptation on the morrow.

The way to the Rectory seemed darker than ever when she turned onwards again, and a strange feeling of fear and uncanniness came over her as she opened the gate. The loneliness of the place frightened her as it had never done before, and she uttered a silent prayer for Divine protection as she entered the dark path between the yews.

The prayer made her feel braver, but in spite of it she uttered an involuntary cry as two figures emerged suddenly out of the darkness carrying something between them.

It was Jane and the cook carrying a box.

"Where are you going?" asked Angela sternly; and her sternness evoked hostility.

"Home," said Jane rudely.

"Are you not afraid of losing your wages and character?" asked Angela, whose experience with sinners had prepared her in some measure for disputes with servants; and the housemaid laughed.

"Our wages was paid yesterday, and Mrs. Graeme will give us our characters. People will think more of them than of yours."

"You are not going too, cook?"

"Yes 'm," said the cook less belligerently. "We had the offer of a place together last week, and only stayed out of consideration for poor Mrs. Graeme."

"And we aren't going to stay till the chance is gone, and

be turned out for nothing," said Jane, whose indignation on the housekeeper's account made her thirst for battle, "not to mention being interfered with by a saint, who treats you for six weeks as if you weren't in the house, and then, when she wants anything done, lectures you as if you was children in her Sunday-school. I wouldn't stay another hour in the house, and cook won't stay without me. John has carried her box home."

"Is he leaving too?"

"No 'm."

"But I dare say it won't be long before he does," added Jane.

"Very well!" said Angela, and she went on her way. On another occasion she might have argued with them, and tried to make them see that they were sinning against duty and conscience more than against herself; but to-night it seemed to her as if she could never speak for God again. How could she be sure that she spoke aright?

Her feeling of uncanniness and fear increased as she approached the house, and a light in the study told her that the Canon had come back.

A new natural life had begun in her with the first awakening of a strong human emotion, and everything had changed. A world of men and women was very complicated and puzzling to her after her world of souls. That had been as simple as a game of chess. Two parties, God and the Devil, on a clear board, with heaven at one end and hell at the other. Every man and woman in the game clearly distinguishable as God's pawn or Devil's pawn, white or black. The laws and limits of the game all known and understood by each pawn, and each pawn conscious of its whiteness or its blackness. The whole game of life had been simplicity itself. And now suddenly everything had become complex. The pawns were attracted to each other or repelled by a thousand considerations apart from whiteness or blackness. There was no knowing which was white or which was black. Those she had considered black called themselves white, and seemed to be moving in the same direction towards the same goals as herself. Each pawn had a different idea of the laws of the

game, and each seemed to have as much right as herself to consider his or her idea on the subject as good as her own.

She had emerged suddenly from the spiritual chess-board into a world of men and women, and the change dazzled her.

She felt the change, but did not know what it was. She wondered why it was that her spiritual partnership with the Canon seemed suddenly a strange, unnatural thing; that for the first time there appeared some possibility of wrong in the fact of her being under the same roof with him—alone. For the departure of the servants had left them the solitary occupants of the Rectory, John the groom sleeping over the stables at the back.

In the porch she stood still, with an indefinable impulse seizing her to return to Lilac Lodge, and remain there until she had found some solution to the many questions which perplexed her. But what solution could she trust as right which she had made for herself? She could no longer ask for Divine guidance when past experience had told her how unconsciously her own human ideas and desires could distort the message. Her soul cried out for a human guide to translate to her the leadings of her God, to distinguish for her between His utterances and the illusions of her own heart and mind. If she could go to Gabriel Lyne and ask him what she ought to do! But to accept his leading would have been to desert her Master. She could take no guide but the Canon, and she struggled against her unwillingness to do so, her actual distrust of him, as against the rebellion of her heart against Christ, a preference of her own self-opinionated methods before the methods which God Himself had chosen for the subjection of her pride.

She opened the door slowly and doubtfully, and found herself face to face with Canon Presyllett, who had caught the sound of her step outside, and was hastening to satisfy himself that he had not been deserted.

"Oh! here you are, dear," he said cheerfully. "I was wondering what had become of you. The servants seem to have taken offence at something. I met them leaving without notice."

"Yes; I have been to ask one of my aunts to come and

help us," she said quietly. And the open honesty of her manner put him at his ease. He had been half suspicious of a stolen meeting with Lyne.

"Are they coming to-night?"

"They were out, and I left a note; but I do not expect that they will come till morning."

An expression of relief crossed his face. It was another bar removed—to a creditable struggle against temptation.

"We shall be all alone then," he said; and the Beast echoed the thought jubilantly.

## CHAPTER XXVII

ALTHOUGH she did not know it herself, Angela had come back from her walk, with its tumult of strange questionings, determined to test and examine the Canon's infallibility. Her determination was utterly illogical, of course; but the same want of logic is found everywhere in questions of infallibility. We base the need of an infallible code or an infallible church upon the fallibility of human reason, and then calmly appeal to that reason we have thus stultified for an acknowledgment that the code or the church bears the signs, whatever they may be, of infallible truth. With the same want of logic, Angela admitted the inability of her reason to lead her aright, but thought of deciding by it whether the leading she accepted in its place was a right or wrong leading. She did not see that she was making, as everybody actually makes, her own judgment the final criterion of right and wrong.

The infallible truths with every man are those opinions which are so ingrained into his nature, and lie so deep, that they are never questioned. And it is by these that they will ever go through the farce of testing infallibility.

Among Angela's unquestioned opinions was the assurance that selfish temper was ungodly; and if the Canon had shown the irritation she expected at the withdrawal of the servants, and had blamed her unkindly, she would have felt inclined to disown him as spiritual leader.

But the Canon bore the desertion very cheerfully, and she could still cling to the idea of his moral superiority, which seemed so necessary to her. Perhaps his irritation in the past had been necessary for her improvement. Christ Himself had driven out the money-changers with knotted cords, and spoken angrily to the Scribes and Pharisees.



As she was about to ascend the stairs on the way to her own room, she turned with a sudden impulse, and followed the Canon as he was returning to the candle-lit study.

"Are you busy, Canon Presyllett?"

"I am never busy when you want me, little one," he said, speaking more tenderly than he had ever done before to her, and he handed her a chair with that clerical politeness which was natural to him in his study, but not so noticeable at the table or elsewhere. Angela remained standing, however, and the Canon took up his position by the old organ, where the glow of the candles illuminated his face.

"Well! what is it, dear?" he asked with fatherly indulgence, and his eyes, that looked so spiritual in the light, devoured eagerly the beauty of her thought-quickenèd face and of her graceful pose, as she stood half undecided just within the door.

"I was wondering why love is wrong," she said, speaking almost abruptly; and the Canon started.

"Why love is wrong?" he repeated rather more austere-ly. "Love for whom?"

"For anybody. I mean the love that makes men and women marry. How do we know that it is wrong in God's eyes?"

The Canon shifted his position uneasily.

"I hope that you are not thinking that there can be any possible justification for your weakness in giving your affection to an enemy of God," he said more severely still; and he seemed relieved when Angela answered gravely, with a half-truth which she honestly took for a whole one—

"No, I was not thinking about that. I was wondering why it would be wrong for me to give my love to anybody. Suppose it was to a real servant of my Master. What is there wrong in love itself?"

The clergyman's gaunt face brightened. The concentration of Angela's mind on an abstract principle had blinded her to the fact that her love for Gabriel was at the root of all her questioning, and she had answered so honestly that the poor Canon was deceived. Looking at their nominal marriage in a far different light from that in which she looked at it, he

told himself that his question had been absurd, unjust to her. It was quite impossible to think of her trying to justify her love for the Infidel, or requiring any proof of its wickedness, when she was the wife of another man. Steeped to the fingertips in conventionality himself, it was impossible for him to understand her perfect disregard of the conventions which in her mind had been always associated with worldliness. He would have been inexpressibly shocked to find her weighing against the opinion of society their own agreement that in the sight of God they were unmarried. What then could her question mean?

Was it not that, seeing the hopelessness of her passion for Lyne, she was inclined to fall back on the only satisfaction of her passion which could be obtained by a comparative and allowable sin instead of a deadly one. Her questioning seemed like an answer to his prayers.

But it required delicate answering, for though he had prayed for her to be inspired with passion for himself, his conscience did not allow him to think of satisfying it. With the increase of her submissiveness disappeared all the considerations with which he had almost been able to persuade himself that an act needed to cement and strengthen the tie between them would be justified by its result. The time of moral effort to which he had looked forward was about to begin for him, and while he exonerated this weak woman's passion, he must not belittle the importance and necessity of his own struggle.

"Human love is not wrong in itself," he said slowly; and Angela started at the enunciation, which meant more to her than she could quite understand.

He misunderstood the pleased surprise which showed itself in her face.

"I can understand," he went on, speaking as an inspired oracle of God might speak, and thinking only of her love for himself, "the love of a woman for a true servant of God, human as the emotion is, being the means in God's hand of keeping her nearer to Himself. It may be the means of curbing her unwomanly self-assertiveness, and make her submit her own faulty judgments to the will and leading of

one who has studied the Word of God more thoroughly, and whose experience has made him a better guide than she can ever be to herself. When love makes a woman submit her will to that of a godly man, the instinct is an instrument in the hands of God for good."

"And the love of a man for a woman?" said Angela, whose old scheme of thought in which only the soul was of any importance had left her with a fine idea of the complete equality of the sexes. "May not the love of a man for a woman be the means, if she is nearer God than himself, of leading him?"

The Canon recalled the occasions on which his wife had presumed to criticise his own conduct, and imagined that she was pleading for the right to do so now. He shook his head forcibly, and fell back on the authority of Scripture. Man was to woman what God was to man. And though it was right for a woman to submit herself to her husband, he must look only to God as his head.

The subject seemed to be running away from what she wanted to know.

"I am not talking about submission, but love," she said, moving her pose a little, "love and marriage? Why should they be wrong?"

He paused before replying, rubbing his gaunt hands together thoughtfully. The Beast was urging him to take her beautifully formed body in his arms, to devour her soft cheeks with burning kisses, and tell her that love and real marriage were allowable, and that there was only comparative sin, now that they had gone through a service in church, in satisfying their passion. But he clung to his holiness. The very fact that he believed her willing to make their marriage a real one gave him strength, for it enabled him to feel a sense of superiority to her which was worth a great deal to him. It made him feel to the full that sense of being better than other men which, little as he guessed it, was the great support of his asceticism.

"You used not to doubt that love and marriage were wrong?" he said, trying to read more of her mind before he answered. "Why?"

"It was because I thought them hindrances to God's work,

because I thought I ought to spend all my time teaching about God and doing His service, and that domestic duties would take my time and thoughts from Him."

The Canon smiled indulgently.

"You can serve God in the home just as well as in the streets and schools and in the cottages," he said; for he had become anxious to see her reconciled to the management of his house, and deplored a good deal of her evangelical work in the village. He pointed out eloquently, in his most persuasive pulpit manner, that every duty can be done for God, the gardener doing his gardening, the cobbler mending his shoes. That the world could not go on unless they did. That only a few were called to give up all their time to preaching, and that preaching was specially a man's work. That woman's proper sphere was in the home.

"So you have told me," she answered resignedly, for he had enlarged on the dignity of domestic management before, "and I think it is that which has made me wonder whether I am doing my Master's will any more than a woman who marries. If by loving a good man I am brought nearer to God, and my service for him is accepted as service for my Master, I scarcely see how marriage is wrong."

The Canon rubbed his gaunt hands together doubtfully. That conventional delicacy which is strongest in those to whom delicacy is not natural and whose minds are not pure, made him shrink from reminding her of the feature of marriage which she seemed so completely to ignore—its impurity.

"When we agreed that our marriage should not be a marriage in the eyes of God," he said after a pause, in which he had seen a chance of avoiding the fuller discussion of the question, "your objection to a real marriage was simply an objection to household duties."

"And to subjecting my will, I think, to that of another of God's creatures," she said slowly, trying to read her own past mind truthfully.

He smiled indulgently, and crossed the room to take her hands unresistingly in his.

"Then I can tell you, little woman, that both those objections need not have weighed with you. They both arose from

that pride and self-will which I have more than once had to deplore in you, and which you have been mistaken in taking for religious zeal. Nothing can be more honourable than womanly service; nothing is more necessary than that a woman should bow her judgment and will to those of one who can lead and teach her."

She had let her hands lie cold in his while he spoke, shrinking instinctively from the contact, but striving against the instinct, as against something foolish, a distrust of and opposition to her spiritual adviser.

Now she drew them away almost angrily, her face taking a look of distress.

"Then why did you let me take a vow against marriage?" she asked, with indignant remonstrance in her voice.

The poor Canon, in his self-centredness and crass ignorance of woman's nature, imagined still that the remonstrance was against the emptiness of their marriage; and her supposed inferiority to his own perfect purity made his face take a more inspired glow of spiritual exaltation.

"I imagined at the time of our marriage that you were actuated by the same motives as myself; that you desired to live in a state of perfect purity, to keep your earthly body unsullied by the indulgences of the flesh. It is not many who are called to the holy state of celibacy, and for those who have not the gift of continence God has allowed in His wisdom the refuge of matrimony, as we read in our Book of Common Prayer, in order that they may avoid the deadly sin of fornication. But while matrimony is allowable for such, we must not forget for a moment that what God really demands for perfect holiness, perfect purity, is absolute sinlessness, and that He only allows marriage to those who find the flesh too weak for absolute purity like His. Do you find yourself too weak?"

"I do not think that I am too weak, with my Master's help, to do everything He requires of me," she said, completely puzzled by his words, which conveyed no definite meaning to her mind, and unable to understand the idea of comparative sin, which had never included itself in her scheme of thought. "What I wanted to know is how we can be sure that marriage is wrong. All my old ideas seem wrong somehow, and I have

been wondering whether that was not among the erroneous ones which I have accepted for want of thought. Bishop Bayliss is married. And to-night I looked in at Goodchild's cottage as I passed. He was reading the Bible to his wife, while she rocked the cradle; and when the baby woke he kissed them both, and somehow I could not think—was it wrong of me?—that our Master could be angry because they were married and loved each other. I cannot *feel* that it is wrong."

The Canon smiled indulgently. She had reached the basis of his belief, one of those ideas which he held without question, and if she did not *feel* the impurity of actual marriage, as he did, it was impossible for him to argue with her. He could only rest content on his higher platform, feeling that his nature was holier than hers. Nor did he wish to convince her. His experiment in holiness demanded that she should remain unconvinced.

"In that case, little woman," he said, with the look of exaltation on his face which came from his sense of spiritual superiority, "I should say that God would impute no sin to you if your marriage became a real one. I should release you from your vow if by so doing I was not obliged to release myself. But that I cannot do. The vow bears hardly on you, perhaps, but you must not repine, remembering that if you cannot see its sacredness, I see it, and you are enabling me to persevere in that pursuit of the highest purity which is demanded from me, if not from you. Let us pray together, Angela."

The argument had reached the conclusion for which he wished, and he fell back upon his old trick of prayer to prevent any further questioning on his wife's part, which would only involve difficult and useless talking. It did not occur to him to feel pity for the girl's perfect perplexity. The love and care of his own soul prevented him giving the fact a moment's thought, and he was on his knees before she could open her lips.

She knelt down perfunctorily at the table, unable to concentrate her mind on the eloquent appeal which she did not half understand, and for once found her eyes opening and her thoughts straying.

She had vaguely noticed, as she stood talking, a little heap of books on the study table. Now, as her eyes opened, they fell on them again, and she read the title of the nearest. It was "Personal Purity, by Gabriel Lyne." The books were those she had ordered, then, and of which the Canon had taken possession. One of them was open, as if he had been reading it. Angela had become quite unconscious of the prayer, which sounded in her ears as a mere musical setting to her thoughts. She moved her head to read another title. It was "Christ against Christianity."

Then the Infidel believed in Christ, and had only cast off the interpretation which men like Canon Presyllett placed upon His words. If so, then the question was not between Christ and the Infidel, but between Gabriel's opinion and that of the Canon; and how did she know that the Canon's was right and Gabriel's wrong? The thoughts carried her away.

When the Canon rose from his knees, and Angela, hearing a cessation in the musical accompaniment to her thoughts, got up guiltily, realising that her heart and mind had not joined in the prayer, it seemed to the clergyman that the appeal to Deity had succeeded in its purpose. His wife, with a suppressed air, showed no sign of renewing the conversation, which had ended so satisfactorily with a justification of passion for her but not for him.

In reality she was anxious to be alone to think over the effect of his words, which meant something so much different to her from what he intended, and she held out her hand.

"Good-night."

"Good-night, dear: but won't you take a little supper? You are looking rather pale."

"I shall not want any, thanks. You will find it laid for you in the dining-room. I saw that it was done as usual before Jane gave notice."

"We shall have to see about getting new maids for you, dear, to-morrow."

Angela gave a sign of assent, but she was asking herself whether on the morrow she would be taking an interest in Canon Presyllett's domestic affairs. If marriage was not wrong—and her spiritual leader had told her distinctly that

for her it was not wrong—then her spiritual partnership with him was useless, and she might possibly abandon it. She did not know to what course the new light might lead her, and she was hungry to be alone to straighten out the thoughts which overwhelmed her.

When she reached her bedroom, and tried to turn the key as usual, she found that the lock refused to act; but the fact did not disturb her. The locking of her door was little more than a habit intended to keep her free from disturbance during her devotions, and there was no fear of disturbance, she told herself, now that the housekeeper and servants had gone, and Canon Presyllett was the only person besides herself in the house.

After an unsuccessful struggle with the key, she contented herself with simply closing the door, and, without lighting the lamp, threw herself on her knees by the bed to think and pray.



## CHAPTER XXVIII

A HARVEST festival anywhere in the neighbourhood was a matter of importance to the old maids of Lilac Lodge, whose Christianity, even at its normal strength, compelled them to look to the church for that entertainment which the worldly get from theatres and music-halls. The desire to see the decorations, to hear a special anthem, with the accompaniment of an amateur string band, appealed to exactly the same emotions which draw others to worldly places of amusement; but the association of these attractions with a church made the entertainment religious, and, what was much the same thing to them, respectable.

The fact that their own Rector was to preach the harvest thanksgiving service at Hartle made them all the more ready to tramp the three miles and more each way, along a dark road, in the cause of religion; for the sensation of feeling themselves connected with the preacher, and sharing, in some indefinite way which they both enjoyed, the reflection of his importance and eloquence, was staling at Windlehurst, but would be fresh at Hartle.

It was very likely, too, that the Canon would take them home in his brougham, both lessening the discomforts of the journey and increasing its glories.

The hope was a vain one, as it turned out. The Canon, who was in his most exalted mood, noticed the two modest little figures as he preached, but the inspiration of his theme soon carried his mind far above them, and he was still deep in a holy reverie as he passed them without notice shyly hesitating at the gate, and closed behind him the door of his stylish carriage.

The value of his time for spiritual work rendered justifiable

for him the comparative sin of owning and using a very fine pair of bays and an equipage to match, as did also the need of maintaining for Christ's sake the dignity of his position as His earthly representative.

The turn-out looked very handsome to the two little Tomtits holding their breath in anticipation of the cleric's notice, and they perked their heads round apprehensively towards the church door as the coachman whipped up his horses, wondering whether the incident had been seen by the old verger.

They had both whispered together to him, as they entered looking for a seat, that they were the aunts of Canon Presyllett, and their dismay at the clergyman's want of notice was increased by the fear that their words might be disbelieved.

They drew up their best silk skirts and started for the dark trudge home rather ruefully, Prudence taking a lantern from under her cape when they were out of the immediate neighbourhood of the church.

But their disappointment, while it saddened them both, was such an equal one to each, that it drew them together, and made each more amiable than usual.

They agreed that the anthem had been very beautiful, but that the tenor was rather out of tune. They agreed, now the entertainment was over, that the string band hardly agreed with their idea of decorum in a church, and wondered together whether dear Canon Presyllett quite approved of an innovation which they could not help thinking was rather theatrical.

"The dear Canon spoke very beautifully," said Iphigenia, who had recovered from her temporary "conversion" sufficiently to look upon a sermon once more as an exhibition intended for her enjoyment and criticism; an appeal directed to other people, which she might kindly declare satisfactory or otherwise, according to the degree in which it seemed to her likely to affect them, perhaps, but chiefly as an exhibition of elocution to please her ear.

"Very very beautiful!" chimed in Prudence. "His exhortation against the ingratitude of the farmers who grumble at God's weather was very forcible, and would touch a good many,

I think. I was glad to see that Captain Benson was there. He grumbles so much."

"Even when his living does not depend upon it," agreed Iphigenia, who had been cross all the week because an early frost had killed a plant in the garden.

"I wonder that poor Angela was not there to hear her husband," went on the elder sister.

"Yes; it would have seemed nicer of her, I thought as we came out. She would have been sure to see us. The Canon is so wrapped up in his thoughts after preaching."

There was a long pause, as they each trudged along thinking once more of their disappointment.

It was Prudence who began again, dropping her voice.

"I have never said so before to a soul, dear, but somehow it seems to me that Angela and her husband do not seem quite suited to one another. They scarcely form what I should call a united couple."

"I do not think that Angela would get along very well with anybody," said Iphigenia, with a little of her old spite for the girl who had carried off the matrimonial prize of the village; "she is so opinionated, so fond of her own way."

"Has it never occurred to you as rather strange that the Canon should have married her?" asked Prudence, more confidentially than ever; and her sister, acquainted with the significance of every change in her intonation, became curious.

"Oh! I suppose it was likely enough when she set up for being so much holier than other people. Men are so easily deceived by an outward appearance. Angela's infatuation for that terrible man Lyne must have opened his eyes a little. But why do you ask?"

Prudence avoided the direct question.

"He had seen so very little of her when he asked her to be his wife," she went on, pursuing her own argument. "Did it never occur to you as remarkable that he should make a proposal of marriage to a girl whom he had scarcely seen?"

"What do you mean?" asked Iphigenia with sharp curiosity.

Prudence hesitated, dangling the lamp in her hand thoughtfully, so that its feeble ray of light danced from side to side of the dark path.

"Well! you see Angela was Miss Gaydon," she said slowly.

"Of course."

"And I am Miss Gaydon. And though the Canon had scarcely seen Angela, he was certainly quite intimate with me."

"Well?" said her sister again, her voice abrupt with a vague suspicion of what was coming.

"Well! you may think me wrong," said Prudence, preparing for opposition, "but I cannot help thinking more and more every day that there has been a terrible mistake. You know how kind and self-sacrificing Adrian is; and if Angela—well! just supposing that she had taken to herself some remark of the Canon's which referred to me, and admitted her love in consequence, I am sure that Adrian is just the man who would have sacrificed himself rather than place her in a false position."

Iphigenia stopped dead in the road.

"Do you mean to suggest that Canon Presyllett really wished to marry *you*?"

Prudence cast down her eyes shyly—although this tribute to maidenly modesty was lost in the darkness.

"I could never help noticing that the Canon treated me with an unusual respect, and don't you think it rather curious, dear, that directly *I* suggested the dismissal of Mrs. Graeme he acted upon my advice? Don't you think, considering the fact that Angela and I are each 'Miss Gaydon,' that there is some chance of the marriage being a mistake?"

Iphigenia's whole soul rose in revolt. She had granted her sister one lover to balance her own; she could not admit another to her credit. She paused, searching for an argument to demolish her claim, and finding none sufficiently conclusive. In her heart she was beginning to wonder whether the explanation of the perfectly unexpected marriage of the Canon with a stranger might not be that it was a mistake, as Prudence suggested, and that the woman he had intended to marry was herself.

But while she was thinking, another consideration occurred to her.

"I suppose that you will call me foolish and romantic," ran on Prudence, "but I cannot help thinking what I do. Of course I should not have married the Canon. When the heart has once been blighted, it is hard to love again."

She sighed sadly, and they began walking again.

"Of course there is nothing to prove that you are wrong, dear," said Iphigenia, so gently that her sister started. "The marriage did certainly seem very strange, and if the dear Canon had given his heart to anybody, I can hardly think that it was to Angela. And, thinking what you do, it would scarcely be right of you, do you think, to take up your position under the same roof as him when Angela wants one of us to help her in the management of the Rectory. Putting aside all question of propriety, it would not be kind to the Canon, would it, dear?"

Prudence had not thought of this side to the question, and she flushed angrily.

"I shall certainly not show by my actions that I doubt the Canon's perfect fidelity to Angela, now that he has married her," she said, with her little beak in the air; and her sister answered very mildly—

"I was only thinking of his feelings."

They had reached the forbidding front of Gabriel Lyne's cottage as she spoke, and, with a common fear of the unholy spot, the sisters linked arms quite affectionately and ceased speaking; trying even to tread more lightly, lest the creature within should hear them and pounce out to injure or destroy them.

They breathed more freely when they were past, and Prudence, who had pondered the question during the lull of disguised hostilities, began toning down the Canon's love for herself into a warm attachment and respect, which encouraged her to think that by staying in the house she could use more influence than her sister in securing a greater state of confidence between husband and wife.

The play of ingenuity was still continuing when they reached the church and encountered the two runaway servants from the Rectory with their box between them.

Prudence pounced upon them full of questions, and the

belligerent Jane was glad of another opportunity of airing her independence. The little old maids were soon acquainted with the state of affairs at the Rectory, and stood still, looking at one another, when the girls had gone on.

“Don't you think that I ought to go there at once?” said Iphigenia. “Angela will be at her wits' end.”

“Just the reason that we should leave her alone until she sends for one of us,” said Prudence, her round eyes lighting up vindictively. “She will see now that she ought to have sent for us immediately Mrs. Graeme left. I shall not offer my services again unsought, and I trust that you have sufficient sense of dignity, Iphigenia, to take the same course. If Canon Presyllett and his wife need us, let them send for us.”

Iphigenia had a sneaking inclination to forget the fact that the housekeeper had been gone two full days without any sign of a request for their presence, but her sister's words made her ashamed of her tender-heartedness, and Prudence's stronger will conquered as usual.

They turned homewards, chatting pleasantly about the straits that their niece would be in without a single servant and with no idea of household management or domestic duty.

In her heart of hearts Iphigenia was still feeling a hidden sympathy for her, and when they reached home and found Angela's note waiting for them, she seized it eagerly as a justification of immediate forgiveness.

But Prudence was still obdurate.

“I shall certainly not lower myself by appearing so anxious,” she said with a superior air, which made her sister once more ashamed of her kindly impulse, “after Mrs. Presyllett has shown us so plainly that she wished to dispense with our services until they were absolutely necessary. I must say that I am rather surprised at a sister of mine suggesting such a thing. In the morning I shall walk over—I am the elder, and it would only be right for me to go first. But I shall certainly not go till after breakfast. You may, of course, go at once if you like, but I have no doubt that Angela would wonder very much why you have given her the trouble of providing you with a bed at this hour, when there cannot possibly be anything to do.”

"I suppose it might look strange," said Iphigenia, persuaded against her will, "but I thought it was decided that I should take the first turn at helping Angela, since she has always shown such a preference for me."

The outstanding quarrel for priority of visit began again vigorously, and it was no nearer a settlement when they retired for the night. It often seems a pity that women have never learnt to toss a penny.

## CHAPTER XXIX

CANON PRESYLLETT felt especially spiritual and exalted. His wife's supposed surrender of all desire for perfect purity in answer to the demands of her passion, heightened by contrast the grandeur of his own holiness. Like the Pharisee of old, he thanked God that He had made him better than other men. Not that he worded it in that fashion even to himself. Nineteen centuries of civilisation robbed him of his predecessor's open honesty of expression.

When Angela had left him he fell on his knees and gave thanks that he had been mercifully led to do his Maker's will undefiled in the midst of a generation which ignored it, and he felt very holy indeed.

The sensation lasted until the end of his frugal supper, when, with the unconsciousness of habit, he rang for the maid to clear the table. The unanswered ring reminded him that he was alone in the house with his wife, with a beautifully formed woman, young, soft-skinned, and tenderly modelled. The Beast woke suddenly in him full of strength and eloquence, and recounted her charms—charms which he might enjoy without a single remonstrance from the world or from the creature herself, who chafed already against the emptiness of the tie which bound them together in the eyes of society. There was no longer even a locked door between them, for he had bent the key by turning it too far. Not that he had deliberately decided to render it useless. In passing earlier in the day, the question had entered his mind whether it could be done, and a single experiment had ruined the key.

He walked to the door, intending to cross to the study to wrestle in prayer there with God, but at the foot of the stairs he stopped, and with one hand on the baluster stood listening.



He wanted to know the full strength of his temptation, and strained his ears, listening for any sound that would tell him whether Angela had really retired yet, or was sitting up, as she so often did over her devotions. The house was very silent, and he could hear his breath coming in short pants. His hands had turned suddenly hot and dry; his legs shook with the excitement of his passion. He mounted a couple of the stairs, and the act frightened him. A sense of horror swept over him at the thought of what those two steps meant, drove him with a sudden determination into the study, and flung him on his knees in prayer.

The prayer weakened his will, as it lessened his dependence upon it and his sense of its responsibility. He felt, without daring to put the feeling into thoughts, that he had thrown the responsibility on God; he had begged Him with all the strength of his emotion to save him from falling. If he fell, it was God who had not given him the strength, and the sin was God's. He had nothing to do in the matter but watch in which way God made him act.

The thought left him listening to the Beast again. To-night they were alone. To-morrow one of the aunts would be in the house, and her presence would be a disturbing element. For even if his wife had theoretically abandoned her holiness, he would no doubt have to contend against some amount of hesitation on her part, due chiefly to physical instincts. It was knowledge that came to him, unfortunately, from a past experience of his earlier days, before prudence had led him in his occasional lapses to avail himself only of purchasable complaisance. Yes, the presence of Miss Prudence or Miss Iphigenia in the house would certainly be inconvenient, and the Beast whispered that only twelve hours remained to him that he could call his own, twelve hours in which he would be face to face with conscience alone.

This sense of having an opportunity which might not occur again made his fall certain. Whatever strength of denial he had—and the fact of his comparative continence and real abstemiousness showed in a man of his natural coarseness that it was a very great strength indeed—was due to his power and love of delaying a gratification which he could enjoy at

any time, never on his power of abandoning the idea of gratification altogether. His sensual conception of heaven saved him from the necessity of doing so. His real idea of holiness was not the annihilation of his lusts, but the holding out against them until they could be gratified without sin in another existence. Not that he admitted the fact to himself. A man's true creed is always the one which he never expresses even to himself.

But while his actual creed prevented him absolutely abandoning the idea of any gratification, it enabled him to luxuriate in the subtle pleasure of delaying it. With the prospect before him of his wife remaining always amenable to his will, and ready at a word to make their nominal marriage a real one, it is quite possible that he could have delayed the satisfaction of his passion indefinitely, with a keener enjoyment of the pleasure, surely no less unclean, of gloating over its possibility, and his own superiority to its temptation. But the bare suggestion of a limit to the possibility was fatal to his strength.

To-morrow, said the Beast, she may change. Her moods and opinions change rapidly. For twelve hours only she is yours.

He thought it was the Angel which answered, laying a stress on the fact that twelve hours yet remained to him; for the consideration cooled him suddenly, and seemed to raise him out of the heat and excitement of temptation. It seemed to him that God had given him the strength for which he prayed, and had made the temptation of the flesh cease to appeal to him.

If he could have read deeply into his heart and purpose, he might have seen that he had already fallen; that he had promised himself the satisfaction of his lust before possible opposition from outside might rob him of his opportunity, but that he had decided to enjoy a little longer the pleasure of thinking that he was denying himself.

But the Canon was never honest with himself, and he enjoyed the calm which had come over him without realising its cause. He fell on his knees and thanked God for having given him strength, and then seated himself to read the Bible, turning more or less consciously to its records of passion and

lust—David and Bathsheba, Lot and his daughters, the whoring of the children of Israel after the Midianites. Where the sin of these people was followed by an actual punishment he felt uncomfortable, and turned from the passage to another, resenting, he did not know why, the physical expression of the anger of the Almighty. The uncomfortable thoughts with which the reading filled him made him close the book, and he took up one of Gabriel Lyne's volumes, which he had been glancing through when Angela returned from the village.

He selected that on "Personal Purity." But the book did not give him any of the satisfaction he had expected from it. Its calm philosophical arguments came like a cold-water douche on the warm glow of emotion in which he was luxuriating—a glow which owed itself really as much to the unadmitted anticipation of his fall as to the pleasurable enjoyment of that holiness which enabled him to delay it. His physical sense of passion-excitement which threw a romantic light over the considered sin was equally necessary to each emotion, and the romance was threatened by Gabriel's cold matter-of-fact practicalness. The Canon shrank instinctively from the arguments which made his passion for a woman, simply as a female animal, an offence against himself, against his mental and moral nature, and against women. To say that it was rendered possible only by an utter absence of sensibility and of sympathy for women, was to make the presence of his passion a degradation, whether he submitted to its demands or not; and the gospel was not at all pleasing to the good man hugging his passion and his holiness at the same moment.

He threw the book away from him, his physical passion cooled by the conception which his mind had involuntarily formed, in answer to Gabriel's argument, of his wife as a woman with heart and mind which could be affected for good or evil by his action.

This is the conception which, according to Gabriel Lyne, was the great safeguard to a man against that passion which sees in woman only a means to physical enjoyment. But of course Gabriel Lyne was only an infidel, and did not believe in heaven or hell, in the pleasing or displeasing of the Active

Spirit of all things, whose will being the one will in creation, could not be opposed.

"Irreligious trash!" said the Canon aloud, as he threw the book away from him in disgust; and then, with a sudden suspicion of the effect which it might have on his wife's mind if she read it, he gathered all the volumes together, and unlocking an old-fashioned medicine cupboard which stood in an angle of the wall, he heaped them together on a shelf there, so that he might keep them under lock and key, safe from her curiosity.

He would go to bed; he had conquered temptation, he told himself; and he walked upstairs bravely and past the unlocked door of his wife's room. But in his heart of hearts he knew that temptation was not conquered; that he was going to bed, not to sleep until his hours of free undisturbed opportunity were passed—but to wait.

But he could not be honest with himself, and he tried to deceive himself further by settling himself for sleep. Then he lay thinking about the nearness of his wife's room on the floor beneath him, and of the ease with which he could reach it.

Midnight struck from the hall clock, sounding loud in the complete silence of the house. She was certain to be asleep now. He rose from his bed, and opened the door of his room to listen. No, he could hear her moving.

"Better wait till she is asleep," said the Beast; and after he had returned to bed, he took the voice for that of the Angel, congratulating himself that once more he had conquered a sudden onslaught of temptation.

The mental strain was becoming painful, and he made up his mind to dismiss the subject entirely from his mind for an hour, not as an aid against its temptation, but because his moral struggle was robbed of free play when he found himself considering what amount of argument and persuasion his wife would require before submitting to a course which he had been forced to tell her was sinless for her but sinful for him. In an hour she would certainly be asleep, and he busied himself repeating mechanically the words of the Morning Service in the Book of Common Prayer, to pass the time.

He thought that it was impossible for him to fall asleep,

but he had under-estimated the somnolent effects of the Litany. He woke up suddenly wide awake, full of fierce regret at the loss of a great opportunity. The gratification he lusted for seemed all the greater now that he appeared to have lost, for the present at any rate, the special chance of enjoying it. He allowed himself for a moment to admit what his purpose had been, and that he had sacrificed it, not through holiness, but through sheer physical fatigue. The next the darkness of the room reassured him, and he sprang out of bed and struck a match to look at his watch. It was not four o'clock yet, and he drew a breath of relief.

The Beast, maddened by the imagined loss of his prey, was not to be silenced now, and the Canon walked to the door and crept downstairs without a remonstrating thought. But at the door of Angela's bedroom his lust for holiness asserted itself again. He had no real intention of abandoning the satisfaction of his passion, but he wanted to satisfy his other contending emotion as far as possible, and he went downstairs to pray once more in the study.

If he had imagined that the prayer would avail anything he would not have gone, but he knew that it would make no difference, that it would only enable him to throw more of the responsibility on God. If he prayed earnestly, and God still allowed him to sin—the same old unexpressed argument.

His impatience shortened his prayer. The restlessness of fully aroused passion prevented him even going through an emotional pretence of earnestness. His devoutness had left him, and the loss of it, the inability to centre his thoughts on God, was unbearable to him. He felt that he could never fix his thoughts calmly on holy things again while this struggle in him was distracting all his thoughts; and the ending of the struggle, whether he conquered or not, became an end worth striving for, to enable him to resume that frame of mind in which alone it was possible for him to hold communion with his God. His memory began to paint for him in glowing colours the devout peacefulness which came over him *after* he had sinned, when, with nothing but hatred and physical loathing for the pleasure which had ensnared him, he could throw

himself on his knees before his God, casting the burden of his sin on the atoning Saviour of mankind, and become full of the sense of forgiveness and renewed holiness, and strong in resolves for the future.

Between that blissful and devout state and his present passion-lashed chaos of thought, in which it was impossible to fix his mind on God for two consecutive moments, lay a few minutes spent in sin—he did not deny to himself that it was sin, or try to persuade himself that it was in his case allowable sin. His absolute need for that sense of superiority to other men, which was at the root of all his asceticism, made it necessary that he should consider God as demanding absolute purity from him. It was actual sin, but it would be over in a few minutes, and he could claim forgiveness for it. The only danger was that he might die in those few minutes, an unrepentant sinner. But he was not ill, or old, or in danger. He was sure to live, and he opened the door of the study, determined to risk his soul on the certainty that he would live through the next quarter-of-an-hour. He shivered as he walked from the dark room into the still darker hall, but not with cold. Although he had thrown only a light dressing-gown over his sleeping-dress, he was quite unconscious of the chilliness of the night. His head and his hands were burning. How silent the house was. Could he be sure that it contained no hidden danger that would rise to thrust him, with black sin on his soul, into an eternity of torment? He tried to laugh at his cowardice, and his hand groped out for the end of the balustrade which would guide him to his wife's room. His heart leapt at the thought of it. His mind filled with sensuous imaginings, and he walked more quickly towards the stairs, with hands outspread before him.

But even as he did so he stopped abruptly, all his panic of death returning. For he had heard distinctly the sound of steps on the gravel path outside the house.

He stopped, listening, his heart beating violently. Yes, they were steps certainly hurrying to the porch, and now he could hear in the night silence a hand fumbling for the bell.

The sound reassured him, and he walked to the door. But the chance of danger made him murmur a prayer for forgive-

ness as he did so, a tentative prayer, not intended to affect his future actions if the incident passed safely.

"Who is there?" he asked hoarsely, unlocking the door without unloosening the chain.

It was one of the villagers, who had run up to the Rectory in breathless haste. A row of cottages was burning in the village—the Rector could see the red glow of it from the doorway—some people had been suffocated. The infidel cobbler had been mortally injured, and was crying for a clergyman, in frenzied terror of hell fire. Would the Rector come at once?

Canon Presyllett did not hesitate for a moment; he never did in a case like this. The man in him was thrust into the background, and as he hastened into his clothes, to carry consolation and hope to the repentant sinner, his passion had gone, and he was wholly a priest.

For the moment Angela was saved.

## CHAPTER XXX

“LOVE and marriage are quite right for me in God’s eyes.”

Angela repeated the words to herself wonderingly, as she walked away from the Canon’s presence after his enunciation on the subject. The truth of the words had been forcing itself more and more upon her reason since her knowledge of love had taken away the childish prejudice she had treasured against it, together with her instinctive dislike to the idea of being kissed or caressed by a man. And now the decision of her reason had been confirmed by authority. Whether she listened to the dictates of her reason, or to the only authority which she could see offering itself in its place, she must rest assured that the sacrifice she had believed herself making to her Master when she went through the form of marriage with the Rector of Windlehurst was one which He had never required of her. She was no holier in His sight than the women around her who loved and married. All that she had done had been to provide the Canon with an outward symbol for the protection of that celibacy which he seemed to think incumbent upon a minister of God. As far as she could understand him, he would release her from the covenant into which they had entered, and let her be free again to act like other women, only that by so doing he would be left himself without this appearance of marriage which he needed to prevent the ladies of his congregation running after him; and Angela could not restrain a feeling of resentment against him. She felt as if he had tricked her into the marriage simply for his own convenience, by encouraging her wrong impression that marriage was something she also must avoid to please God.

She remembered now that her conscience had revolted against the deceit of the form through which she had gone,



and new faith in the leading of her conscience sprung up in her. Had it not played her false only when it persuaded her to take the Canon's idea of right as better and truer than her own? She tried to think why she had lost faith in the leading of the inner light within her. Was it not simply because she had believed love to be wrong?

If love was right—and reason and authority combined to declare it so—the inner light was justified again, and she might still follow its leading.

With a sudden flash of delightful illumination, she saw in her attempted conversion of Gabriel Lyne once more the clear leading of her God. It was true that half her enthusiasm had been due to an earthly love, but now it was possible to believe that this love had been inspired by her Master so that Gabriel and she might teach each other. She no longer thought of the teaching being all on one side. Gabriel, with his disregard of Christ, must still need leading nearer to God than he was, but Angela had to admit that in many things she could learn from him. Their love was surely ordained by her Master, so that they could help each other.

The Canon had told her that love in woman was an instrument in God's hands to make her submit her will and judgment to that of a wiser man. Surely no man was wiser than Gabriel. To submit her judgment to his was a natural, effortless thing. Already she saw that he had changed the whole current of her thoughts. She knew that she had become suddenly a different woman, a better one. She shrank instinctively from the picture of herself before she met Gabriel—how full of self-righteousness she had been, how confident of her superiority to all around her; and now she dared not call herself better than the villager's wife nursing her baby in a humble cottage, she could not call herself better than the Infidel whom she had imagined so degraded and sinful. And she knew that her present humility was better than her old pride, knew it too surely for question, and without the need of any authority or text. How unsympathetic she had been, treating everybody as so many pawns she had to move this way or that in answer to the dictates of her conscience, as if it were the only conscience in the world.

She could laugh aloud at the absurdity of her attack on the Squire's wife. For the Squire's wife had become suddenly not a conscious sinner, but a human being with complicated ideas of duty like herself, which, for all she knew, were better than her own. If love was right, pretty dresses might be right, pretty dresses which made the world brighter, which might have their place in attracting love. With a sudden impulse which she answered without giving herself time to question whether it was good or bad, she lighted the candles on her dressing-table, and stood before the glass ruffling her hair, which required so much manipulation to keep primly tight over her forehead. Would Gabriel like her better with her red-gold hair in its natural waves and rebellious curls? Then, in her sudden burst of girlish vanity let loose, she unlocked her drawers and began rummaging for the prettiest things they contained, trifles given as presents by her friends at school, too pretty and frivolous to be worn, too full of the memory of pleasant friendships to be given away.

When she approached the glass again, to stand with alternate smiles and uncertain flushes glancing at her reflection, she wore a green silk handkerchief on her shoulders, bracelets on her wrists, and a dainty lace arrangement pinned down the front of her dress.

She flushed again, half with happiness, half with doubt, as she told herself that Gabriel would certainly think the effect pleasing.

But was not all this sin, was it not all wicked vanity? She shrank a little from the accusation of her past self reviving in her. But the past self was no better than she was. All that divided them was a lost sense of her own importance, a lost desire to be better than other girls, and know that she was better. And her desire to look pleasing was too unselfish for her to regard it as a sin. It was not for her sake, but for the sake of the man who loved her.

The thought that they loved each other, and that the love was not sinful, but God-given, was quite enough for her at present, and kept her mind from dwelling on any practical issue of her convictions. Its sweetness intoxicated her. She was full of a delicious sense of liberty too, that had come to

her with the vindication of her guiding inner light. It was no longer a will-o'-the-wisp evolved from the morass of unholy emotions. It was the Divine torch which God had given her to light her in the path He wished her to take.

It had required the decision of religion enunciated by its minister to make her feel sure of the fact, but once given, it made all need for the Canon's decisions disappear. A belief in his infallibility was no longer necessary, and with the absence of need, the belief to which she had clung so despairingly disappeared. She allowed herself to listen to all the arguments against it which had filled her mind before, but which she had rigorously suppressed. She wondered why they had not convinced her when they were so conclusive, and did not see that they had convinced her, but that she would not admit herself convinced. She did not know that we can *believe* we believe anything, as long as that belief seems necessary. It is the secret of all so-called religious faith. Nobody believes a single illogical dogma of any creed. But when the dogma seems to us absolutely necessary to morality or happiness, we must pretend even to ourselves that we believe it. Hence the reason that the usual religious argument is so utterly abortive. The internal evidences of the infallibility of the Bible, the historical proofs of the resurrection of Jesus, have never satisfied a single intellect until that intellect has persuaded itself that proof of these points is absolutely necessary. When they have persuaded themselves, any proofs will do. The proofs do not support the belief, the belief supports the proofs.

It was the same in Angela's case. She had felt that a belief in an infallible mind to read the will of God from His word was absolutely necessary, and she could see no offer of one except from the Church to which she belonged, in the person of its official servant. She accepted the Canon as infallible for almost three days, therefore, in flat defiance of her reason. Now she could allow herself to listen to reason and admit the illogical absurdity of her belief. If the Canon was infallible, then every clergyman was infallible; and she knew that they held very different opinions from each other. The Bishop, for instance, believed in clergymen marrying, although the Canon did not. Above all, her judgment told her plainly

that her nominal husband was full of faults. How ridiculous it had been for her to try and think that his childish irritation over the coldness of his coffee had in it anything akin to the irritation of Christ with the money-changers. And then his enunciations of duty went for nothing, because they had contradicted each other. He had encouraged her to think that there was something sinful in marriage, when he wanted her to assist him in giving an outward protection to his celibacy; and now that she had done so, he stated calmly and as impressively that marriage for her was quite right.

If it was necessary for a woman to have the aid of a man to assist her feebler judgments—and the thought of Gabriel Lyne and her dependence on him made the idea reasonable to her—then she was sure that the Infidel of Windlehurst would give her more aid than the Rector.

Was not love a Divine leading, teaching her whom to choose as a guide to her feebler judgments? The thought had occurred to her before, even when she did not know that she was thinking, and she had put it away from her, saying that Gabriel could only lead her away from Christ. But, in her passionate eagerness to think everything good of the man she loved, she jumped at the title of his book which she had seen, and forced it to throw a new light on his attitude. It was not from Christ and his preaching that he had broken away, but from the perversion of his teaching, which had made so much of the Canon's creed seem irreligious to her. Why had she revolted so much against the Rector's advice and commands? Was it not that they seemed to her to be founded on some idea altogether different from the desire to fulfil Christ's teaching? Against Gabriel's enunciations of duty her conscience had never revolted, except against the submission to the Canon, which he had enjoined from a perfectly false idea of their relationship.

She sat down at the dressing-table with her Bible and Concordance before her, trying to find authority for many things which the Rector had laid down as duties—many of them seemed to her so useless, so devoid of all benefit to himself or others. Even his fasting had always seemed to her unwise

when it interfered with his health and usefulness. She had rarely fasted herself, and it seemed to her now that she had been right. Did not God wish her to be healthy? Why had He made food if it was not to be eaten? A new idea of God was dawning upon her, due more than she guessed to the few suggestive thoughts Gabriel had given her. She tried to think of Him as the Creator of everything, of the pretty handkerchief on her neck, of trades and humble occupations. She had felt in the past as if every occupation was wrong which engaged the mind to the exclusion of devotional thought. But if so, surely she had no right to eat food, wear clothes, or live in a house, that owed themselves to other people's concentration on earthly pursuits. Surely she had been wrong to classify every undevotional work together as ungodly. Godliness or ungodliness must depend upon the way the work was done. She had tried to make her life a fac-simile of the life of Jesus in a wrong manner, taking His acts as her guide rather than looking for the spirit which actuated them, and trying to preserve that spirit in ordinary everyday life. The fact that He had called Peter from his fishing had degraded fishing in her eyes. Now she remembered that He had not called every fisherman from his work.

All the thoughts that had struggled in her mind since her talks with the Infidel, half dormant, or denied utterance through a preconceived idea of their sinfulness, arranged themselves in order to-night, as she sat luxuriating in anticipations of the new freer life which they promised her. The ascetic Christianity, with its contempt for every human employment except preaching, its distrust of every human emotion, which had formed her whole conception of religion, sank more and more into insignificance as she thought, and, with it, her respect for Canon Presyllett and for the tie which bound them together. She sat up long into the night, with no thought of undressing, and as her thoughts turned more from the God of the Bible to the God who had made everything, from tradition to reason, she blew out the candles, and opening her window, sat there looking up at the clear night sky, her thoughts only quickened by the keenness of the air.

She could hear the Canon's footsteps as he passed on his

way to his room, and little thought, poor innocent child, of the fierce unholy battle that was raging in him.

After he had passed she closed the window and paced the room, still thinking. Her mind went back to the fancy picture which she had drawn of Gabriel Lyne's attitude to Christ. Although she did not know it, she was struggling to reconcile to each other two ideals.

Mrs. Gateacre had been right when she said that a woman never becomes enthusiastic over an idea unless it has a person at the back of it. It was the thought of Gabriel which made Angela enthusiastic over the new ideas which had come to broaden her creed. She was possessed by the delicious thought that each new broader idea brought her nearer to him, and made her thoughts more like his. More or less consciously, she was fighting her way to a mental position in which it would be possible for her to admit, without remonstrance from conscience or creed, her preference of Gabriel Lyne to Canon Presyllett; in which it would be possible for her to accept the Infidel as spiritual guide. Her passion to justify Gabriel mastered every prejudice. Her respect for him was greater than her respect for any body of thinkers or any set of ideas. Her old creed she identified in her mind with a man whom she knew that she despised and disliked, the man who was nominally her husband; and her contempt for the Christian clergyman made her ready to condemn his Church and the whole attitude of thought which he officially represented. Her faith, as we have seen, had been a record of personal influences, and love made her cleave to the Infidel more than to any person she had loved in the past. Cecile's morbidness appeared to her in its true light, and her friend's regretted renunciation of the world became only the final outcome of an entirely false view of God and His will. Even her dead mother became human and fallible, the sweet, pure expression of ideas which she had received from others less holy than herself, and which only her own beautiful nature made as admirable as they were. Angela did not shrink from the conception, because it served rather to increase than lessen her love for the sweet, calm woman whose memory she cherished. More human and fallible, her mother became only more lovable as she thought of her.

But suddenly she found herself face to face with her Christ, the imagined ideal man, who had made personal her old creed, and given it all the power it exercised over her, Christ who had absorbed all her love and enthusiasm, Christ whose bride she had called herself when she renounced the idea of any earthly marriage.

She stopped suddenly, chilled and shocked by the thought, which had come to her so unexpectedly that it seemed to be a supernatural reproof from Heaven that she was loving a human being better than her Lord. She made an ineffectual struggle to reassure herself by the thought that Gabriel really worshipped her Saviour. What right had she to think so when the Infidel had refused to bear the name which proclaimed him a believer in her Master?

The imagined face, which Angela by the least effort could realise almost as plainly as that of Gabriel himself, seemed to look down upon her with grave, sad remonstrance, asking whether she too was denying Him, and making His death and suffering for her of no effect.

In an agony of remorse the girl threw herself on her knees, assuring Him of her faith, of her love, of the complete subjection of her will to His. If He demanded it, she would never see the Infidel again, or listen to the persuasive arguments, which might lessen to her mind the importance of her Saviour's sacrifice. The submission was very hard, and cost many tears; but Angela's devotion to the Dream-Man was so great, that it would have enabled her to conquer for Him every human impulse, even her love, if she could have been absolutely sure that He required it.

But how was she to be sure that her Saviour demanded the sacrifice? The godliness of human love, proclaimed by Canon and conscience alike, had wiped away the old ascetic idea that whatever was unpleasant was godly. And she had submitted in the past to the supposed will of Christ, only to discover that her supposition was wrong, that she was submitting to a false idea of duty altogether. Might it not be the case now? She knew that her character had gained in Christ-likeness through her friendship for Gabriel, and she had still the delightful hope that her influence might be the means of

bringing him nearer to her Lord. But was he really farther from Christ than herself, if his actions were more Christ-like than hers, as it seemed to her?

She thought of the sympathetic consideration he had shown for the distressed steer and the man who had lost it, when *she* had had no thought but for her personal safety. He had acted as she could have imagined her Master acting.

In a way, indeed, her devotion to the idealised Christ had paved the way for her devotion to the Infidel. In him she had seen her ideal acting without effort from her imagination, with the added charm of unexpectedness; and she struggled still to reconcile the two ideals—to see God through a man, as the Canon had told her, with the authority of a text, that a woman ought to do.

The passion to justify Gabriel overpowered her, and she let her mind wander back to those ideas of Christ's salvation which had offended her sense of justice. But she no longer tried to belittle her sense of justice. Might the idea that Gabriel was to be tortured everlastingly simply for the want of a mental admission which he was too honest to make, be a wrong idea altogether, distorted from the real words of Jesus by men like Canon Presyllett?

Fired by the thought, she lighted the candles once more, to refer to her Testament; and she was poring over it laboriously, trying hard to read it without any preconceived ideas of its meaning, when a sound on the floor above her made her start.

It was the Canon coming downstairs, and, afraid that the light in her room at that hour might attract his attention and bring a disturbance to her thoughts, Angela blew out the candles hastily. She remained silent, wondering, when his steps stopped at her door, whether her midnight pacing had attracted his attention. She breathed more freely when he had passed downwards to the study, and struck a match as silently as possible to ascertain the time from her watch. It was almost four o'clock. How quickly the hours had passed.

She wondered why the Canon was stirring, and resented the fact, since it threatened the complete isolation. Every moment she expected to hear him returning, to knock at her



door and tell her that she ought to be asleep—as if it were possible for her to sleep to-night.

The mere thought of the Canon assuming the least control of her actions drew her thoughts abruptly into a practical channel. What was she going to do as the outcome of all her new convictions?

To an ordinary girl, brought up, as most girls are, to consider religion and respectability, Christianity and the conventional rules of conduct, as practically synonymous terms, the position would have seemed a much more serious one than to Angela, who owned no duty that could not be traced clearly to the direction of her God.

The ordinary girl would have said: "I have married Canon Presyllett. I did so under a wrong idea of duty, but that cannot help me. The church service has made me his wife, and his wife I must remain."

But Angela had never admitted for a moment that the church service had made her the Rector's wife. She kept clear before her always his agreement that in the sight of God they should remain unmarried. Her vows in church had been simply vows of perpetual virginity, and the vow became a worthless thing as soon as she saw that perpetual virginity was not required of her. She was in the position of a nun, who, having renounced the world at the supposed bidding of God, realises clearly that the renunciation is contrary to His will. The fact that her passion was still dormant, requiring only a protestation of love, a single caress from the man she loved, to kindle it into full fire, yet still a possibility rather than a reality for want of that one word and kiss, helped her to look at her position still calmly as a matter of conscience, with little thought of the strength of the conventional chain with which she had shackled herself. It seemed enough to her if she could, without offending her Lord, share the Infidel's sympathy and confidence, enjoy his leadership in all practical questions of duty, in that attitude which the Canon had declared from Scripture to be the proper attitude of woman towards her husband. Beyond this her thoughts had as yet scarcely strayed. To receive his caresses, to be always quite near to him, to perform menial duties for his

comfort, to have children which were his as well as hers—all these hopes were sweet and beautiful to her, but they were very vague ones, kept in the background by her maidenly shyness, by the uncertainty which remained in her mind yet as to whether he really loved her. They could be done without, she told herself, if she could but have Gabriel as her earthly representative of God. All her thoughts started from the one certain fact that she loved him, not that he loved her, although she felt with trembling happiness that he did. The Squire's confidence had opened her eyes, and half explained to her the reason of that brusqueness he had shown her, the reason of the subtle difference she remembered now noticing in his manner before and after her marriage.

She had only to tell him, she assured herself, that her marriage with the Canon was not a real one, to make him help her in all her difficulties. Farther her mind did not carry her, except in the way of vague happy dreams which she hesitated to touch with the cold finger of practical dissection.

While she was thinking it out, she was startled to hear footsteps approaching the porch under her window, and, with a mad love-borne thought that they might be Gabriel's, she opened the door of her room very gently and silently.

The voice that sounded below, when the hall-door was opened by the Canon, was not the one she was hoping and thirsting for; she knew Gabriel's too well to remain in doubt for a moment, although she could not hear what was said till the Canon's voice sounded more plainly as he turned to the stairs.

"I will dress and come with you at once," he said; and Angela closed her door again softly. The Canon was not dressed, then; and the thought that the least accident might have made her meet him shocked her acute girlish sensitiveness, and made her realise, as she had not done before, the strangeness and unpleasantness of her position. It seemed to her for the first time that there was something rather shocking in it. Strange thoughts ran riot through her head, and frightened her.

She could not stay another day or night in the house alone with this man, who was not her husband. She wondered even

whether she ought not to leave it at once, and only the fact that Canon Presyllett had been called away somewhere, reconciled her to the thought of remaining. She did not want to frighten her aunts by rousing them in the early hours.

After his steps and the closing of the hall-door had told her that he was gone, she sat down to think how her departure would affect him.

The Canon would be very angry. He would say that she had broken faith with him. The latter thought chilled her. She had never wilfully broken a promise in her life, and the new question of conscience arose—how far was she bound by a vow when she discovered it to have been a foolish one?

The question was very disturbing. Her nominal marriage had become horrible to her, and still she had vowed solemnly to live under the same roof as the Rector and to share his name. If she broke her vow, she would not only inconvenience her nominal husband; she would make him feel disgraced in the eyes of all who knew him. He had told her as much when he tried to reconcile her to those outward signs of affection which he thought necessary to preserve the appearance of their marriage in the eyes of the world.

Angela had passed beyond that stage of thought when any emotion in another which did not appeal to her conscience could be thrust underfoot ruthlessly, the stage of thought which had allowed her to attack Mrs. Gateacre's finery. The awakening of her humanity with the awakening of love, had filled her with a new consideration for others, and the thought of the bitter blow she contemplated dealing at the Canon's pride shocked her.

The deceit of their marriage might be wrong, but she had allowed him to enter into it through faith in her intention to maintain it to the end. Was she not bound to maintain it, whatever the cost to herself, until he released her from her promise?

The question was such a new one, concerning her duty to man rather than her direct duty to God, that it did not occur to her to look to her Christ for an answer. She found herself wondering only what Gabriel would decide to be her duty.

His idea of duty seemed to her to have suggested the scruple to her mind, and she felt a dull hopeless certainty that he would tell her, if she asked him, that she *must* keep her promise.

A passionate longing came over her to put the question to him verbally, to tell him everything, and let his clear just mind direct her actions. She found herself wondering how early he rose, and whether his old housekeeper was in the cottage to satisfy those scruples of propriety, if she called, which the Infidel considered, but which she knew now that he considered chiefly for her own sake.

Then suddenly there flashed into her memory the idea of his books, which she had seen lying on the table in the study. What a storehouse of ideas for her. She wondered that she had not thought of them before. Surely they would help her to know what Gabriel Lyne's idea of duty was, so that she could be sure of his opinion about her promise.

She lighted a candle quickly, flushed with the thought, and hurried down the creaking staircase of the dark silent house, too full of her purpose to think of its eerie loneliness, the loneliness which had brought terror into the Canon's conscience-stricken heart.

The books were not on the table where Angela had seen them, and she glanced round the room hungrily and full of disappointment.

Finding no trace of them, she crossed to the dining-room. If they were not there, the Canon must have either taken them to his bedroom or hidden them somewhere, for fear of her seeing them.

The girl's pride revolted at the thought. Her vow had given the man no right to treat her as a child, and when a survey of dining and bed room assured her that he had done so, she did not hesitate to take out her bundle of keys and try each in turn in the cupboard lock. If the Canon had been present she would have demanded the return of her books, which she had only given into his charge tentatively. As he was not, she would not allow herself to be balked by the unfair impediment which he had placed in the way of her using her own judgment. If none of her keys had fitted, she would in her heat have probably tried to break the door open ;

but, luckily for the preservation of the Canon's mediæval furniture, success came with the third key, and the books lay revealed before her, piled on an empty shelf beneath the array of drugs and patent medicines with which the Canon industriously struggled to delay his entrance into a life of bliss.

Re-locking the cupboard, she went back to her room with her prize, and began dipping into the books at random. But every sentence on which her eyes fell seemed very deep and difficult, and very soon the print grew misty before her. Drowsiness had suddenly overcome her after her long vigil, and she closed the books reluctantly.

"To-morrow I must read them, and they will tell me what to do," she said to herself; and she cried a little as she thought how likely it was that they would point out as her duty the course which seemed so impossible, so unbearable to her.

But she had grown suddenly too sleepy even to think of it any more, and she only stopped to remove her outer dress and corset before lying down, to fall asleep in the middle of the childish prayer she repeated always as her head touched the pillow.

The room was still dark when she woke suddenly, to feel rather than see the gaunt figure of the Canon bending over her, while his bony hand touched her uncovered breast caressingly.

## CHAPTER XXXI

GABRIEL had been working very hard, rising early to start writing immediately after his morning swim and breakfast, and continuing late at his desk. He sat up later than ever on the eventful night of Canon Presyllett's moral struggle and Angela's liberation from her asceticism, for before him he could plainly see the word "Finis" parted from him only by a few hours of enthusiastic toil. The welcome word cheered him on and kept fatigue at bay. A few more pages and the work would be complete; there would be no touch needed that could not be given by another hand. He could read through and revise the last chapter in the morning, ready to deliver to his publisher a day in advance of the promised date, in time to take afternoon tea with the Squire and his wife, and leave for town in the evening to make some preparation for his journey. A literary friend whom he could trust had promised to revise the proofs for him while he was away; and all the work that he alone could do, that the lack of his guiding mind would leave for ever unfinished, would be accomplished when he wrote the last word.

He rushed on towards it as if some presentiment of his approaching self-sought fate had told him that it was the last night on which he would ever write.

He wrote on enthusiastically till the last word was done, and he laid down his pen with a sigh of relief as the clock over the fire struck two.

"Thank goodness!" he said, as he wiped his pen and leaned back.

It was more than the ending of a book. It was the completion of his message to his fellow-men. In the different books he had written he had enunciated his creed, and explained

away carefully and laboriously every error which seemed to him to stand in the way of its acceptance. As far as he could see at present, nothing remained unsaid. The man who read and understood his books could say all the rest for himself. The leading thoughts, which he had thought out for himself, and which were different from what anybody had ever said before, were all in black and white, and with the completion of this task he could go back to his novel-writing and newspaper work.

The worst of setting oneself a definite goal like this is the sudden want of aim which comes when the goal is reached. One moment he had been hastening forward enthusiastically, the next his enthusiasm was left objectless.

He took up the sheets almost involuntarily to revise the last that he had written, but put them down again when he remembered that he was encroaching on the task he had left himself to fill up the last day that he must remain at Windlehurst.

The thought of idleness still frightened him, for he had found it hard enough work, with all his enthusiasm for his book, to keep himself from trying to get another glimpse of Angela, and on the last day of his stay in the village the desire would be greater, he knew, than it had ever been. How could he go away without seeing her; and yet what good could it possibly do? What purpose would it serve, except to increase the passion which already was well-nigh strong enough to master every healthy honest impulse in him?

No, he must not see her. If he meant to play the part of a man false to his kind, he would do it with his eyes open, he would not drift into it. Was he going to steal the Rector's wife, if he could; or was he going to accept the fact that she belonged to another man, and act as honestly as he had always tried to do?

Put straightforwardly, there was only one answer possible to him, and he did not dilly-dally with temptation. He put the thought of a last sight, a last interview, away resolutely.

But the short struggle had only increased the mental excitement which had enabled him to finish his book and defy fatigue. He could not lie down yet, and turning down the

lamp, he put on hat and Inverness, and locking the cottage door behind him, started on a long walk to calm his mind.

With the need of some goal before him, he turned at the end of the lane towards Barnwood, thinking that he would see what progress had been made with the model dwelling he was building. Possibly the thought that it would make him pass the vicarage unconsciously affected his decision; but when he went by the wooden gate, he did not turn his head to glance across the dark garden towards the house. The mad impulse to stop there warned him not to do so. Had he glanced he might have seen the light of Angela's candle gleaming faintly behind the gaunt arms of the ascetic yew-tree on the lawn, as she bent over her Testament trying to find justification there for his creed.

Poor Gabriel could not guess that; and the fact of the girl's love, although it would have made his struggle a thousand times harder, would not have shaken his conviction about marriage.

He walked along the silent road with long swinging steps, trying to keep his mind fixed on his plans, on thoughts of what he would do in America.

Already he had made many friends there by his books—friends whom he had never seen, but whose grateful letters encouraged him in the work he had set himself, and promised him a warm personal welcome when he crossed the ocean that his thoughts had passed before him.

His visit was the best possible means he could take of distracting his thoughts from the woman who filled them now too completely. He could make a lecturing tour, too, to see the whole place.

Perhaps he would meet some woman like Mrs. Presyllett whom he could love, he tried to tell himself reassuringly, but it was almost an open attempt to deceive himself.

He felt almost ready to believe that humanity has been mapped out into couples; that for every man there is one woman only who is exactly the right woman for him, and with whom alone he can be perfectly happy.

He tried to laugh at himself for the thought, which depended upon a more grandmotherly direction of the universe than



accorded with his ideas of the Creator's government. What a miserable idea it would be, for the single selection of a wrong partner would lead to an indefinite line of wrong selections. If Angela were meant for him, the Canon had secured her, thus leaving some woman whom Presyllett ought to have married to be selected by a wrong man, who in turn would rob another woman, and so on indefinitely.

No, it was not worth a moment's thought; and still, was it possible that there could be another woman in the world who would attract him as this devout, beautiful girl, with beliefs utterly opposed to his own, had done? He could not imagine the possibility.

He tried to force himself to do so. The idea that another man's wife was the only person in the world who could make him happy was surely a delusion of egotism.

His mind was full of memories as he walked. The gate where he had come to her help against the harmless steer had recalled her vividly, then the house as he passed it had awakened fresh memories, then there was the spot where he had met the Squire and rejected his suggestion. Could he have rejected it now, he wondered. Even the model dwelling, when he reached it, black and cheerless with its gaunt scaffold-poles, interested him only because he had talked about it to Angela. His mind went back to their meeting in the slum. He had been in love with her even then. What was it that made him feel such a sudden and complete sympathy?

He drew himself up quickly.

"What a fool I am to let my mind dwell on what I cannot have."

Impatient with himself, he set himself to think out the plot of a novel to write, and made a compromise between heart and resolve by imagining one which began to weave itself round himself and the woman he loved. He found himself going to America, and marrying a girl there because she was very much like Angela. Then he returned to England, to find that the Canon was dead and Angela free.

It was a good start. How would it finish?

He busied his mind thinking out possible endings as

he walked more slowly back to the village, until a reddening of the dark horizon over Windlehurst put an end to his thoughts.

His first idea was that the Rectory was on fire, and he started into a run; but it was not long before that panic disappeared and he was able to locate the fire as being somewhere in the village street.

He slackened speed on ascertaining the fact, and it came quite as a new thought to him that wherever the fire was, he must see whether his help was needed. He broke into a run again, but it was a steadier one than before.

Just past the Rectory a man clattering by on a galloping horse shouted the news to him excitedly: the cobbler's cottage was on fire, and the flames were spreading to the neighbouring ones; he was off to Barnwood for the engines.

Gabriel was glad of something to do, and he was running harder than ever before the man had shouted his last word. The thought of fellow-creatures in danger nerved all his energies and took away the very thought of fatigue, as he ran like an athlete in the direction of the baleful glow, which became every moment more lurid.

In the village street some men were making vain attempts to get loose a ladder chained by a single rung to the wall outside the carpenter's house. The carpenter was lolling out of the window above in his night-shirt swearing at them, and too drunk to understand what they wanted or to tell where the key was kept by which the ladder could be unloosed. The men were quite disorganised, too full of anxiety for the instrument of life to agree on any definite plan for getting it. They were arguing with the sot at the window when Gabriel reached them, and he took in the position at a glance, slipped out his pocket-knife, and slashing away with deft force at the chained rung, managed to break it through with his foot. He took one end of the freed ladder on his shoulder to hurry it round an abrupt turn to the scene of the fire, pushing his way through the crowd of distraught villagers clustering helplessly round the ruin of their homes.

The cobbler's cottage, where the fire had started, was one of a long low row of thatched ones with one tall house at the

end, which the flames had reached, having half burnt out the three intervening ones. The thatch of the one on the other side of the starting-place was on fire too, burning more slowly against the wind. From the untouched houses the inmates, half clothed, were bundling out furniture with wild haste.

Gabriel's quick eye saw everything instantly—saw, too, that the fire was licking its way up the one tall house higher and higher to where some children and a woman were huddled at the topmost window screaming for help. Those of the bystanders who had come from the adjoining houses out of danger, or who had lost all chance of saving their own property, were staring up at them stupidly and helplessly. They raised a feeble cheer as the ladder appeared, and made way for it to be placed against the wall.

As Gabriel was about to mount it, an old woman rushed up to him, frantically pulling at his coat, and begging him to get her Bible on the lower floor, which was all aflame. It was the Bible that her mother and her grandmother had read before her, and all the comforting texts were marked. She ran out a long excited rigmarole of its virtues.

Gabriel pushed her aside, very roughly for him.

“We will think about your paper, woman, when the lives and homes are saved,” he said from the ladder.

In a few minutes the frightened group was safe on ground, and Gabriel with his clear authoritative voice was trying to restore order to the frantic helpless mob, arranging a cordon of men from the well to the house which had barely begun to burn, and from which the inmates were bundling their chattels like the rest, with no thought of stopping the flames. It was he who mounted on the burning thatch like a demon among the smoke, throwing bucket after bucket on the thatch as it came to him.

He was brought down by a new terrified rumour running through the crowd. Somebody had been left in the tall house; an old bedridden woman living alone in the back room had been forgotten in the general confusion and panic. He handed his bucket to the man nearest to him, inspiring him with a little of his own courage as he asked him to take his place, and in a moment was at the foot of the ladder

again, raised against the window from which the woman had been rescued.

The window was still clear, but from the storey below swept out red tongues, licking the ladder ravenously. The ascent had become a gravely hazardous one, and for a moment Gabriel paused, asking himself whether he had any right to risk his life for that of an old bedridden woman. In his distrust of unthought emotion, he questioned even the lust of life-saving that was strong upon him.

Only an old bedridden woman! But there is no measure by which we can gauge the value of life to a single human being. Young people, who seem to have everything for happiness, throw it away carelessly; the old and apparently miserable cling to it tenaciously. He could imagine anybody caring for life more than he cared for it now, with the woman he loved denied him, with the aimlessness which had come to him as he realised that his particular individual work for his fellows was done. But, above everything, there was the chance on his side that both lives would be saved, the certainty on the other that if he hesitated a fellow-creature might be killed horribly. He could see the old lady's terror and despair vividly. Whatever there was good in him was due to this power he had of realising the feelings of others, of putting himself in their place; and at the thought of the bedridden woman's despair when she felt herself abandoned, when she lay on her bed awaiting the death that seemed to her inevitable, he could hesitate no longer. The quick passage of thought had not taken a moment, had not shown a sign of hesitation to the crowd, which was beginning to look upon him as a different creature from themselves, somebody to whom life and death did not matter.

Behind the huddled barricade of table and chairs which had been rescued from the flames, an anxious group was gathered round the terrible figure of the infidel cobbler where he had been laid on a mattress close to the dead bodies of three children suffocated in the attic of the same house, his face white and livid under the grime of smoke, his limbs writhing in torture, but his mind perfectly, terribly conscious. He was alternately cursing God for his pains, and begging those

around him to run for the Rector to give him an official passport against hell fire. The lurid light of the fire falling on him as he lay and writhed, cursing and pleading, made him look to those around like a soul already in hell, and they were whispering to each other that an infidel always dies a coward, that it is a terrible thing not to be on the safe side.

How many firm resolves were made that night, vows to go to church regularly, and to do with a cold dinner on Sunday, to treat the Rector with more respect, and to keep a Bible in the house to read on Sundays beside the ornamental family one.

Resolves to be kept in some cases as long as three months, but in most to be forgotten as soon as the flames were gone, and the cobbler, pronounced out of danger, began boasting of his superiority to superstition again.

"Ah! yes, an infidel is always a coward when it comes to a matter of death," was echoed everywhere through the crowd, even among those who stood watching with wonder, and almost worship in their hearts, the calm-faced man climbing higher and higher on the slender ladder which was already beginning to burn. His courage made him no longer an infidel to them. The flames spit out at him as he passed, and when he reached a clearer space above the volumes of smoke that had almost choked him, they could see below that his coat was smouldering and burning a little at the edge. Somebody tried to cheer as he entered the window, but the tension was too great for the single voice to be joined by another.

Then there were terrible minutes of waiting, made more terrible by a whisper going round that the house was shaking, that the ladder was actually on fire in the middle. One man less distraught than the rest was trying to draw it away from the house until it was needed, and shouted with a curse to the rest to come and help.

He was dragged away unanswered as the front wall began to rock, giving him barely time to escape before wall and ladder fell forward with a great crash together.

There was a cry of horror for the brave man inside who had risked his life and must surely have lost it.

The next moment the place was gleaming with brass helmets. The engine from Barnwood had come at last.

The tall house was a mass of débris now, not half its former height; and in a moment, as the news of Gabriel's attempt spread, the helmets seemed all over it, bending down and peering among the smoke for some sign of the hero.

A thrill of excitement ran through the crowd when it was seen that he had been found, and the next moment half-a-dozen firemen were drawing him out of the ruins, black with smoke, his clothes smouldering, his hair and eyebrows singed, unconscious, but with the body of the old woman in his arms—dead.

They thought that Gabriel was dead too, until Dr. Cairn, who lived at the far end of the village, hard by Lilac Lodge, came on the scene, and pronounced him much less injured than seemed possible considering his fall with the house. Not a limb was broken, although one arm was badly burnt. It was the shock of the burns and of the fall which had rendered him unconscious.

The doctor was one of the many people who were being attracted to the scene by the glare and the sounds of excitement. A farmer from the next village had driven over in hot haste in his waggonette with a couple of pails of water in it, half emptied by the jogging of the cart at breakneck speed over the rough country road.

They lifted Gabriel, unconscious still, into the waggonette, to drive him home with the doctor.

It was just as they were lifting him in that the Rector of Windlehurst appeared on the scene, to speak words of consolation to the cobbler; and as his eyes fell on the shapely figure limp and helpless, and the keen handsome face dulled by unconsciousness and marred by grime, he experienced a certain amount of pleased relief, which he transformed into a religious emotion by quoting the verse of a psalm to himself, and thanking his God that there was a day of retribution and downfall for the most boastful and self-sufficient.

## CHAPTER XXXII

THE clock in the church tower was chiming the hour of six when Canon Presyllett passed on his way home from the smoking heap of ruins which showed where the fire had been. He had been very active, ministering to the spiritual and temporal needs of his afflicted flock, satisfying the cobbler, encouraging the penitent, consoling the bereaved, and exhorting the callous, beside making arrangements for the temporary shelter of those who had lost their homes. He had thrown open the school-house for them, while the Squire, who had come down just as the fire was definitely conquered, was ordering from the village store quite a lavish supply of provisions for their breakfast.

Both men were in their element, the good-natured Squire rejoicing in having something to do for his people, which did not leave him bothering over the question whether it was really wise or not, the Rector enjoying a more than usual sense of his spiritual authority when he found it everywhere recognised. Only the praise which he heard on every side lavished on Gabriel Lyne served to disturb his complete complacency, and the fact that the Infidel was supposed to be at death's door helped him to bear even that trial with fortitude.

The exhortation which he found himself called upon to address to others, emphasising the suddenness of death, the horror of being called to the last account with sin unconfessed and unforgiven, reacted upon himself. He had hurried down to the fire with a strange warring of emotions in him—the Angel congratulating him on the answer which his Master had given to his prayer for aid against temptation at the moment and in the manner least expected, the Beast still

growling at the loss of his prey, and rebelling against the loss of the one perfect opportunity.

But, in the excitement and exaltation of spiritual ardour, no part of the good man's mind was left free for the Beast to fill with sensual imaginings, and the Angel ruled supreme.

As he passed the church on his way home, the Rector began to congratulate himself on the fact. The nearness of the Rectory brought back vividly to his memory the chaotic war of emotions in him which had broken down his sense of holiness, taken from him the very power of thinking godly thoughts, and degraded him for a moment into the position of the weakest passion-tossed sinner that he had been exhorting.

How tremendous the difference which separated him from the self of two hours before! What possible gratification of the senses could balance that calm sense of holiness and superiority to worldly passions which possessed him now? How could he have ever thought of choosing between the two? How faithful God was to His promise—the promise to give aid to such as called upon Him in time of need!

The dramatic interruption of the fire in the village at the moment of his greatest weakness was for the Canon a miracle provided by God on his behalf. The sudden recollection that his miracle had cost at least four lives made him stop, suddenly stabbed by a suspicion that hurt his complacency. His heart stood still, and a feeling of sickness overcame him as the unpleasant thought suggested itself. Were these four lives an atonement required by God for his own indecision, a price demanded for the Divine intervention, intended to bring home to him the wickedness of that moment when he had deliberately made up his mind to sin?

His rebellion against the idea which would have left him with four lives on his conscience was so great that it conquered even his habitual self-centredness. He began to think of the other soul that had been affected by the fire, the cobbler's, possibly Lyne's—for the Canon honestly thought that Gabriel was securing his freedom from any idea of Divine control by an effort of wilful rebellion which would weaken as death brought him nearer to its penal result.

At the remembrance of the cobbler the Canon's momentary



sickness and horror disappeared. If the deaths were an atonement for sin, required as the price of a soul-saving intervention, surely the responsibility rested upon the converted Infidel, who had a lifetime of sin to atone for, not a moment of readiness for sin.

After all, the Canon told himself, he had not sinned. He had simply abandoned all human effort and thrown himself entirely upon the help of his God, and his action had been justified by the result. God had helped him by a miracle. Was not his attitude the supreme attitude of faith which God Himself enjoined, a complete surrender of human effort, a complete dependence upon his Maker?

The thought gave him a delicious sense of non-responsibility, of comforting strength. He need fear no temptation, however strong; he need not struggle. As long as he could pray he was safe from falling.

The Beast jumped at the permission thus given him to exert his full strength without danger of ill consequence. The complete loneliness of the house, as the good man let himself in, inflamed it to full fury.

Without a moment's warning which he could see, although every single thought which had entered his mind since passing the church ought to have been warning to him—except the involuntary suspicion of earthly atonement so quickly dismissed—the Canon found himself, as he closed the hall-door behind him and stood in the still dark hall, trembling with an overpowering passion.

He glanced into the dining-room, and then made his way to the kitchen. No fire had been lighted, there was no sign that his wife had risen.

Had the miracle failed him, and allowed him to return with the temptation of the night still in full force?

If so, surely it was God who was responsible if he fell, and not himself. He had prayed earnestly for help, and the Sender of help must be blamed if it was insufficient.

A horror was upon him of another moral struggle like that of the night, which had left his soul strangled and dumb; and its uselessness made him keep away all thought of moral effort.

He would leave everything in the hands of God, and he strode upstairs trying to repress all thought of his own, to see if his wife were still asleep.

Without knocking, he opened the door gently, and glanced across with his heart in his mouth at the scarcely distinguishable bed, just faintly outlined where it came between him and the uncurtained window. But before the dim outline could tell him anything, his acutely listening ear had caught the sound of Angela's regular breathing. The miracle had failed. She was asleep.

His own breath came short and quick, and he could feel the beat of his heart as he crossed the floor to bend over her recumbent figure where she had thrown herself half dressed on the bed. His hand outlined her figure, stopping as it reached her neck.

The beating of his heart was painful now, and frightened him. Words seemed to ring in his ears that an hour ago he had been speaking as the minister of God to those who had been affected by the cobbler's agony.

"Remember that death may come at any moment, in the twinkling of an eye, while we sleep, while we are steeped in the fumes of intoxication. Just one more day of sin, just one more sin, perhaps you say to yourselves, and we will turn to God and accept His forgiveness for all the past; but in the midst of that one sin your soul may be called to its account, and your unrepented sins hurl you into those flames which are so much more indescribably terrible than those which are consuming your homes."

The words with which he had tried to alarm others occurred to himself now. Was he sure that his heart was strong? Was he sure that he would live to repent and know God's peace once more?

But the fear could not turn him. The Beast held him fast, and he felt that with damnation yawning before him he must still go on. His quivering fingers tore open rudely the buttoned bodice which kept from him the fevering softness of a woman's skin, and as his claws touched it Angela woke suddenly with a scream of alarm, drawing herself away from him.

It was well that they were alone in the house, he told him-

self, although her real fear seemed to him only due to ignorance of who he was.

"Don't be frightened, dearest," he said, trying to speak reassuringly, and cursing the hoarse harshness that had taken all the music out of his voice. "It is only I, your husband."

She was sitting upright now, and he tried to draw her to him. She caught his hand and tore it away from her waist with a force that surprised him, and her stockinged feet sounded on the floor.

He guessed rather than saw that she was intending to leave the room, and reached the door before her. The next moment he almost had her in his arms as she reached it too late. She slipped out of his grasp again, and over the sound of his heart's quick beating and his panting breath he could hear the scratching sound of a match.

The next moment they stood looking at one another in its light, Angela at the other side of the room by the dressing-table.

She was trying to light the candle there, but as he took a step towards her she drew back, and the match went out. In the complete darkness the Canon thought it safer to get back to the door.

The girl had uttered no sound yet beyond her first involuntary cry of alarm. Her silence maddened him.

"What is the matter, little wife? It is only I, your husband," he said; and the attempted caress in his voice made her shudder as she had done at his touch. Her heart was thumping as furiously as his, but from another cause. Her face, if he could have seen it, was as pale with terror as the linen of her bodice.

She made an effort to calm herself and to speak steadily.

"I cannot speak to you here, Canon Presyllett. I would rather you left the room."

He had been prepared for some opposition, from her childish shyness and modesty, and had intended to combat it with convincing casuistries; but every biblically expressed idea had deserted him. He could think of nothing except that they were alone in the house and that he was stronger than she.

The one glimpse he had caught in the match-light of her half-clothed figure, with the red-gold of her hair flowing loose

and dishevelled over her white shoulders, had inflamed him to fury and left him all beast.

He was straining at the key which he had rendered useless, trying to make it do its work now that its uselessness had served his purpose; and when the task showed itself to be a hopeless one, he stooped down to wedge the door beneath with the knife from his pocket.

A triumphant sense of power came over him when the door was secured and he could venture to seek for her in the darkness where she was hidden.

In a moment he had reached her and was clasping her waist, while the girl, in the last fury of panic, beat out at him with her clenched hands, leaving marks on his gaunt face that compelled the Rector of Windlehurst to remain as much as possible in seclusion for some days afterwards.

He crushed her to him, with his face so close to hers that she could not strike it.

"You must not be so cruel to me, darling one," he panted hotly into her scorching ear. "This is not the way that a wife should treat her husband."

"I am not your wife! I am not your wife! God save me from ever being that," she cried distractedly, the words half strangled by the tightness of his embrace.

Her strength seemed to be leaving her. His hot breath on her face poisoned and suffocated her. She tried to think that it was all a terrible nightmare. Was it possible that she was awake and conscious; that this loathsome hot-breathed thing was the priest whom she had idealised, as he stood in the pulpit in the old days, into a saint of God? It was too horrible for thought. Already she felt herself degraded horribly by his loathsome touch, and what fresh degradation would she not suffer if no help came.

For the help of her God she had been praying without words from the moment of her awakening, with a confused entreaty that was half addressed to the Deity and half to Gabriel.

Now she uttered a prayer aloud, with some quick inspiration of self-deceiving womanly intuition that there might remain sufficient of the cleric in this animal crushing her to be affected by it.

The Canon was deafened by the Beast, and did not relax his hold; but as Angela spoke there came one more of those coincidences which are so disastrous to belief, so healthful to superstition.

The loud clanging note of the door-bell echoed suddenly through the silence of the house.

The animal in clerical clothing was taken aback by it, and released his hold, and in a moment the girl had darted to the door, trying to cry out for help.

He was afraid that his impromptu bar would give way before the force of her desperation, and followed quickly to place his back once more against the means of egress.

Angela had already found it fixed, and turning back to the window, threw up the sash to scream for help.

"Be silent, for Heaven's sake," he said, coming towards her; and Angela turned.

"Stop," she said, with a sudden courage which had come to her with the answering of the prayer. "One step and I will throw myself from the window."

The threat cowed him. There is a perspective to be taken into account in all calculation of human motive, and for the Canon the fear of a scandal in the parish loomed bigger than the more distant damnation which his passion had braved. In his fear lest she should carry out her threat, he threw open the door.

"Your conduct is scandalous," he said angrily, and almost with conviction—for it had become a habit with him to consider every action wrong which opposed his own will. "I am sure that on calmer consideration you will regret it. But I have no wish to influence you by a mere exercise of strength. I will leave you, Madam, to dress and see who is ringing at this preposterous hour, and I should like to speak to you after you have done so in my study."

She stood listening to the sound of his steps ascending the stairs, and breathed again when she had heard the door of his bedroom above open and close. Then hurriedly slipping into her dress and shoes, she ran down to open the hall-door, bundling her hair up as she ran.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

MISS IPHIGENIA GAYDON was one of those unfortunate people who never lie down at night without reviewing the occurrences of the day, making a special feature of unpleasant events, and more especially of those which might have been different had she acted or spoken more adroitly. Her mind dwelt on the debates in which Prudence had come off best, and busied itself elaborating the answers which would have changed the battle could she only have thought of them at the time.

To-night she kept herself awake thinking over the probability that Prudence would conquer as usual, and succeed in her intention of being the first to undertake the management of the Rectory. By the time that her own turn arrived, Angela might elect to manage without assistance, and, in any case, the honour would have been seriously discounted. All the ladies in the place who called at the Rectory and found Prudence there, would have learnt to associate her sister, and not herself, with the position. Prudence would be sure to speak as though her residence there was a permanent one, and drop no word of the alternate arrangement.

Iphigenia felt indignant with her in advance for such selfish meanness, and decided resolutely that if by any chance she herself got the first turn, she would act in just the same way, to pay Prudence out for her intended unkindness.

If she could only guess the argument by which Prudence intended to gain the day, after breakfast. She imagined twenty, and prepared clever answers to demolish them all, but old experience assured her that Prudence's argument would be the twenty-first, and would find her unprepared.

Prudence's calm assurance of victory made her very fearful and very very jealous. What would her argument be?

Suddenly she started. What if Prudence had no argument at all, but intended to go to the Rectory before she was up in the morning? The idea set her little mind working violently. How anxious Prudence had been that their visit should be put off till the morrow. Iphigenia could see the reason of her anxiety now, the reason that she had been content to let the discussion remain unfinished.

It was true that her sister had stated definitely that she would not go to the Rectory till after breakfast, and the remembrance dispelled her fears for a few minutes. She trusted her sister's word implicitly, as far as her word went. The fact that neither of them would dream of telling a verbal lie made the game of deception which they played with one another a very intricate one, and Prudence's statement did not long satisfy her sister.

Prudence would certainly not go to the Rectory till after breakfast, since she had said so; but what was to prevent her getting up early and breakfasting before her sister was awake?

The sisters' religious regard for the truth had accustomed them both to little artifices of this description, and Iphigenia's doubts became acute again. This must certainly be what Prudence was intending to do, and the little Tomtit was shocked at her sister's intended meanness. She must circumvent it, of course, even if she had to lie awake all night in order to get to the Rectory first.

When, after a fitful sleep, she woke between five and six, she rose at once and dressed very silently, so as not to disturb Prudence; and after making a hasty cold breakfast in the fireless kitchen, stepped on tiptoe into the hall to draw back the bolts as quietly as possible. After she had done so, she stopped a moment to listen if the house was quite silent, and was startled to hear the door of Prudence's room opening. Either the slight sound she had made must have roused her sister, or else Prudence was preparing to carry out the plan she had anticipated.

Full of fear in either case, the little old maid slipped out

of the house in breathless haste, feeling that Prudence must be looking at her from the window, but afraid to turn.

The fear that her sister was hurrying into her clothes to follow her made her hasten. If once she could offer her services to her niece, and Angela accepted them, Prudence could not possibly interfere with the agreement.

Even when she found the whole village in a state of frantic excitement over the disaster of the night, her fear of Prudence's pursuit prevented her lingering longer than was necessary to learn the barest facts about the fire. She was glancing impatiently over her shoulder all the time that Hodges, the grocer, was telling her, in his doorway, of Gabriel Lyne's heroism, and the Squire's lavish generosity in the way of supplies for the homeless people in the school-room, which seemed to excite even keener admiration in the breast of the tradesman from whom the supplies had been purchased. He was still busy sending them off, and Iphigenia hurried on, glad to hear that the Canon had preceded her by less than ten minutes. It relieved the doubt she had been feeling lest she should arrive at the Rectory before even such an early riser as Angela was out of bed.

If she could but get into the house, the earliness of her visit would only impress the Rector and her niece with her enthusiasm to help them in their extremity; and now she went on more cheerfully, glancing back from time to time in imminent expectation of seeing her sister hurrying after her along the dark road.

She drew a breath of relief when she reached the Rectory, and walked more slowly and sedately up the long path that led to the door.

"Prudence will find herself too clever for once," she said as she stepped into the porch; but the self-congratulation was premature. Even as she spoke, she was roused into a new fever of excitement by hearing the gate of the garden click and the sound of footsteps hurrying up the path. Desperate with the fear of losing her prize at the last moment, she seized the bell-pull and tugged at it vigorously, sounding the peal that answered poor Angela's prayer.

Then she pushed open the door and closed it behind her, to



stand uncertain how to act in the dark hall. She thought she caught the sound of voices on the floor above her, but the fear that they proceeded from a bedroom prevented the idea of her going higher from entering her maidenly mind. She could hear Prudence in the porch now, and her ear caught too the sound of a door opening above. The Canon's voice sounded full of severity, but she could not catch the words. Then the hall-door opened, and she was face to face with her indignant sister, Prudence, with face all aflame with running, and hat all awry with haste.

"Iphigenia Gaydon, I am ashamed to think that you are a sister of mine," began the elder Tomtit belligerently.

"I am ashamed of you, Prudence Gaydon," retorted her sister, "saying that you would not come here till after breakfast, too."

"I have had it," retorted Prudence, indignant at the accusation. She had half of it in her hand still—a slice of dry bread which she had nearly choked herself nibbling at as she ran.

"You must have breakfasted rather hastily," said Iphigenia with icy irony; and her sister was searching for a reply when their niece came running downstairs with an impulsive excited haste that they had never seen in her before, and which assured them of the need she must be feeling of their help.

Prudence managed to secure her first, throwing her arms round her neck.

"My dear child, I was so sorry to hear of your difficulties, and came over as early as possible to help you prepare breakfast."

"Pardon me, Prudence," interposed her sister, still with her calm air of bird-like dignity, "but I came first to offer Angela my help, and I am sure that she does not need us both."

The elder Tomtit ignored the remark altogether, and addressed herself only to her niece.

"I am sure that you must be at your wits' end, poor child, but it will be all plain sailing now I have come."

It was dawning upon her, even in the semi-darkness of the hall, that her niece was trembling and excited.

"I think that you might leave Angela to decide which of us she would prefer to stay with her," said Iphigenia, feeling herself left out in the cold; and to her surprise the girl began to laugh hysterically. The idea of two ladies struggling for the honour of remaining in and managing such a house of horror for a man like the Rector, the difference between what he was and what they thought him, overcame her and forced her to laugh, although the laughter hurt her and made her cry.

She got free with difficulty from the embraces of the two little ladies, each struggling to comfort and caress her, and flung open the door.

"Come," she said excitedly, forcing back her momentary hysteria, "we can none of us stay here. It is not safe. He is an unholy, wicked man. I shall never enter the house again."

The poor little Tomtits followed her with frightened wonder down the obscure garden path, each too startled to speak.

Half in jealousy of each other and half in real tenderness, they had taken one of the girl's arms apiece, and walked three abreast.

Iphigenia, thinking of the time when her lover died, was stroking the girl's hand. Prudence was thinking of the scandal which seemed imminent, and was the first to speak.

"We will walk up and down the garden until you are calmer, dear," she said, "and you must tell us all about it. Has the Canon been reproving you? If so, dear, you must remember that he is your husband, and that it is only right for him to try and correct——"

Angela interrupted her. She had grown quite calm now, and spoke with something of her old dogmatism.

"Canon Presyllett is not my husband. He has no claim whatever upon me. Thank God he has shown me plainly that my promise no longer binds me when he has broken his."

The old maids thought she must still be rather hysterical.

"You must let me go home with you and be your niece, Angela Gaydon, again," she went on; and the scandal loomed bigger in Prudence's mind.

"I think that we had better walk up and down here until you are calmer, dear," she said, "and can tell us what has offended you, and let us advise you before you take any rash step."

"I would rather not speak of what has happened just yet," said Angela, shuddering involuntarily at the horror of what had passed, at the thought of her foolishness, which she saw now in its true colours. Her conscience had revolted from the first from the deception of her pretended marriage. The result had shown that she ought to have obeyed its leading. The fright and degradation, as she felt it, through which she had passed, had gained her at least this absolute certainty, that no idea of right at all could compel her to keep up the farce of her nominal marriage; and a sense of sweet freedom came over her, which lifted her out of the horror of the past and made her spirits rise jubilantly.

She smiled when her aunt proceeded to point out the advantage of talking her little difference with her husband over quietly with them and letting them act as mediators.

"I can never return to the Rectory," she said with firm decision.

"But, my dear child, whatever the Canon has done to offend you, you must remember that you are married to him," said Prudence. "You must consider what people will think if you leave his home, even for a little while, and return to us."

"People may think what they like, auntie. I shall never come back here."

"But I care what people think," said her aunt rather severely, "and I really do not believe that my sister and I would be justified in giving you a home if you persist in leaving that of your husband."

"But it can do no harm, dear," put in Iphigenia gently, "if we take Angela home to breakfast. Nobody can suspect anything from the fact, and she will no doubt see matters more sensibly and brightly after she has had something to eat. And it is quite dark still. Nobody will notice us."

They had reached the gate by now, and Prudence had laid

her hand on it as if to keep her niece a prisoner in her husband's premises.

She was about to answer, when an interruption came in the shape of Dr. Cairn, stepping vigorously out of the semi-darkness with characteristic briskness.

"Morning, ladies. Morning, Mrs. Presyllett. A terrible night's work this. I was just coming over to you to ask a favour. I know that you are always ready for an act of charity, and I am really at my wits' end for a nurse. I know that in a case of need you don't let a man's creed stand in the way of your Good Samaritanism."

"No," said Angela eagerly, glad of the chance of practical service. "Who is it that needs my help?"

The doctor hesitated a little.

"Perhaps you will have a chance of converting him, now that he is on his back," he said, to smooth the way; and Angela's thought flew at once to the infidel cobbler.

She asked whether it were he.

"No, Skeggs is in the hospital," he said briskly; "but poor Lyne we took home. I should not have allowed it if I had known what a poor creature that housekeeper of his is. She has no more idea than a baby of nursing an injured man. Why, I found her taking ice-cold water, just because I did not say distinctly that it was to be warmed to——"

The girl interrupted him eagerly. Her face had grown quite white, and her voice trembled.

"Mr. Lyne has been hurt?" she asked.

"Goodness! yes; haven't you heard of his heroism? It is all over the village. Faced almost certain death, they tell me, to get old Mrs. Mordan out of the fire. She was dead, poor soul, before he reached her, I believe. Still it was a splendid bit of courage, and I don't mind saying that the man's a grand fellow, Mrs. Presyllett, if he does believe a little differently from the Canon and the rest of us. Why, the very hair is burnt off his head!"

For a moment Angela felt the ground sway under her, and she clutched at the gate to prevent herself falling. Only the thought that her help was needed by the man she loved kept her from fainting.

In the half light nobody seemed to notice her weakness. Miss Prudence's voice came to her indistinctly as above the roaring of waves.

"I hardly think that Canon Presyllett would approve of his wife nursing such a man as Mr. Lyne."

"I think that you are wrong, Madam—if the Rector is a Christian. What do you say, Mrs. Presyllett?"

"I am sure that no Christian could refuse," said Angela, commanding her voice. "Is Mr. Lyne in danger?"

"No, thank goodness; although it seems a miracle that he is as well as he is. He has been pretty badly burnt, and I left him delirious, but I have no doubt that we shall pull him round very soon. It won't be my fault if we don't. I don't often have a hero on my hands."

Angela breathed a deep sigh of relief, and all her energies came back.

"I will go to him at once," she said.

"But, my dear child," said her aunts both together in dismay, "under the circumstances!"

"And you have not breakfasted, have you?" added Iphigenia.

Angela smiled, and only replied by opening the gate. To think of breakfast when Gabriel was ill and needed her help!

She attached herself to the doctor, asking him eagerly every detail of the fire; while the poor little Tomtits followed behind, discussing in excited whispers the inadvisability of the step which the self-willed girl was taking.

They had jumped to the conclusion from the first that the quarrel between Angela and her husband was connected with her preposterous infatuation for the Windlehurst Infidel and his books. Perhaps a qualm of conscience for the part they had played in the matter helped to make the suspicion a certainty with them. After what they had said to the Canon they could understand him speaking very severely indeed to his wife, and Angela's self-will and impatience of control explained the rest. But what would her husband say when he heard that she had gone straight from his reproofs to play the part of nurse to the man who had

already obtained such a shocking influence over her mind? The fear of an open rupture, of that most terrible thing in their little world, a scandal, became more imminent; and still, what could they do with a self-willed unmanageable person like their niece?

They discussed the question in excited twitterings behind her back, while the doctor in front was giving her a brisk account of the fire and of Gabriel's heroism, which made the man more and more of a god to her.

At the end of the Hartle lane the doctor had to leave her; for a doctor must breakfast whatever happens, and there were other sufferers from the fire.

The old maids pounced upon her excitedly as soon as he was gone.

"Angela, you must not go to that man," said Prudence quite fiercely.

"It really is not proper for a young lady to go to his house," put in Iphigenia.

"Let alone the insult to your dear husband," added Prudence.

Angela faced them with the immovable calm they had learnt to dread.

"My dear aunts, I have told you that Canon Presyllett is not my husband. You will soon learn with what trickery and deceit he entrapped me into taking his name and living in his house; but that is all over now, and I have not time to talk about it at present, when my patient is waiting for my attention."

"If you persist in your scandalous conduct, I shall feel it my duty to go and inform the Canon at once," said Prudence, rendered frantic by her obstinacy.

"Whatever Canon Presyllett hears, or says, or does is not of the slightest importance to me," said Angela, full of impatience to be off; and she turned away, leaving the two Tomtits staring at one another hopelessly. Iphigenia was the first to speak, with lowered voice.

"Do you think, dear," she said timidly, "that poor Angela is quite responsible for what she says and does. She has always seemed rather strange; and this wild talk about not

being married to her husband, when we were both present at the wedding, really makes me think—it seems a terrible suggestion to make, but really there seems no other explanation.”

“I was just beginning to think the same thing,” said Prudence. “Well, there is no doubt about our duty in the matter. We must return to the Rectory at once and tell her poor husband everything that has happened.”

## CHAPTER XXXIV

ANGELA was one of those good women who love nursing, and her devotion to it, both in the French village below the château where she had lived with Cecile, and in Windlehurst and Barnwood, had done much to prevent her ascetic creed stifling the real womanliness in her, and freezing her heart with its condemnation of human emotions. The tenderness and sympathy which it was worldly for her to waste on mere earthly friendships or sociability, found a religious vent for itself in the tending of the weak and ailing; and her enthusiasm in Auvergne for devoting herself to every sick villager had rather annoyed Cecile, whose sensitiveness was shocked by many of the duties which a nurse is called upon to perform. To Angela they were made holy by their usefulness, and she had never shrunk from any duty when a human pain could be relieved one iota by the sacrifice of her natural instinct of delicacy.

During the little while that she had been in Windlehurst she had earned a reputation which more than justified the reliance that good old Dr. Cairn placed in her.

The well-controlled calm and perfect self-confidence, which, with the aid of a narrow infallible creed to assure her that she was right and everybody else wrong, had made her beauty alone save her in ordinary intercourse from being actually repellent, transformed themselves in the sick-room into the most necessary qualifications of an ideal nurse.

The fact explained the totally opposite opinions which were held about her in the parish. Those she had exhorted were ready to ridicule and revile her, those she had helped in illness worshipped her as an angel.

The calming influence of her presence made itself felt



instantly at "The Barn," where she had found Mrs. Marlow red-eyed with faithful weeping, and in a state of complete mental distraction over the written orders that Dr. Cairn had left with her.

The old lady was full of grateful relief as she led the calm-faced girl up the pleasant low-balustered staircase to the confusion of rooms above, which all seemed to open upon one another with a perfect contempt of the ordinary rules of bedroom architecture.

Angela's heart beat a little more rapidly as the first door was opened, but it took her only into a box-room, at the other side of which appeared a blind passage leading into another unfurnished room, upon which the Infidel's bedroom opened. The journey, short as it was, appeared to her one of intolerable length. But the length of it was forgotten instantly when she found herself in the same room with her hero—her hero, not as she had known him in the full beauty of his strength and manliness, but tossing restlessly from side to side with feverish muttering, one arm heavily bandaged, and his face, that had been so full of calm sweetness and thought, scarred disfiguringly across the nose and cheek, and flushed with delirium.

He was none the less her hero, none the less loved, for these signs of his heroism; and the girl felt an almost overpowering impulse to throw herself on her knees by the side of his low bed, kissing his dry lips and hot brow, and pillowing his restless head on her arm.

It was the instinct of the nurse rather than scruples of shyness and modesty which conquered the emotion of pure unselfish tenderness.

She turned to the old housekeeper.

"You should not let him toss about like this; he will move the bandage on his arm."

"But what am I to do, ma'am? I cannot hold him still."

Angela did not answer. She was drawing down the blind at the window through which the sun, just risen, fell across his face, after opening the window a little to relieve the closeness of the room. Then she had crossed with silent

unhurrying footsteps to the bed, to smooth with deft fingers the disordered pillow and lay her cool hand on the delirious man's forehead, after renewing the oil that had dried on his scarred face.

The effect was magical. Before the wondering Mrs. Marlow had been dismissed to dress ready for any service that might be required of her—for the old lady, startled out of her sleep by the arrival of her injured master, was still wandering about distracted in the impromptu costume she had hurried on to answer the door—she had seen the restless tossing cease, and the incoherent mutterings of his delirium had become calmer and more connected.

When she had gone, Angela walked to the window and drew the blind aside to read the directions which the doctor had left. Then seeing that there was nothing to be done for the present, she drew a chair to the side of the bed, and sat there holding Gabriel's uninjured hand in her cool one.

A sense of perfect content and peace had come over her with the conviction, gained both from Dr. Cairn's directions and the appearance of her patient, that Gabriel would not die. Her heart was full of gratitude. What greater delight could God have given her than to wait on her hero, to know that he was so dependent on her care?

Her nominal marriage already seemed part of a horrible nightmare destined to fade into the background of her mind and torture her no more. The future did not trouble her. The happiness of the present was all-sufficient.

She would not let her mind dwell on the time when Gabriel would regain consciousness and know her, feeling vaguely the need that there would be then for reticence on her part. Now she could make no show of reserve to herself. She could admit that her heart and soul and body were ready to be offered up a willing sacrifice to this man, who had never asked for the gift. She would not let her mind dwell on the chances that he did not desire the gift; but when he regained consciousness, she knew that the uncertainty would raise a cold barrier of reserve between them, and frighten her from admitting even to herself what her own heart had told her so plainly.

With a rapturous joy in the freedom that was hers still, she bent down and pressed her lips to the hot hand which she held in hers.

The action seemed to rouse him a little from the stupor into which he seemed falling, and he began to speak again so naturally and quietly that Angela's heart stood still with the shock of thinking that he had regained consciousness and knew what she had done.

But he was only speaking of the fire, and by-and-by in his quiet voice he went through again the debate that had been in his mind as he mounted the burning ladder to almost certain death.

"Life! What is the good of life if I must not think of her?" he was saying; and Angela bent lower, listening eagerly, half ashamed of playing eavesdropper to the man's soul, and still unable to resist the temptation.

"But the old woman is bedridden, lying there waiting, and you are one of the hounds that let her wait," he went on more excitedly; and Angela laid her cool hand on his forehead again softly.

The action soothed him and made him silent again, and the girl sat waiting, half glad at his silence, half anxious to hear again words that might tell her what she was longing to know. The few sentences she had heard had contained a suggestion which filled her with hunger.

While she waited, glad and yet sorry for his silence, Mrs. Marlow came in, making quite a to-do at the door in her efforts to open it noiselessly, to inquire whether Mrs. Presyllett had breakfasted.

Angela was sufficiently human to be feeling ravenously hungry, and was glad of the old lady's offer to bring her up something to eat.

"I shall not be many minutes, Mrs. Presyllett," she said as she left the room again; and the name seemed to reach the delirious man.

"Mrs. Presyllett," he repeated softly; and Angela thought that he had become conscious and was addressing her. But when she went over to his side, after reclosing the door silently, it was to find him still talking to himself.

"She really must not come," he was saying. "I can't stand it if she keeps coming. I shall have to leave the place. Really it is very kind of you, but if you only knew how hard it is for me, my beautiful little Nun."

Angela's heart was in her mouth. She bent forward eagerly.

After a long pause of suspense for her, Gabriel went on talking again.

"And why not? She cannot love a creature like that, and I love her a hundred times more truly than he can ever do. Why not?"

Angela's heart beat tumultuously. For a moment she was perfectly happy in the certainty that the words could only apply to herself, that she had the assurance she craved for of her hero's love. But his next words made her puzzled and doubtful again, and struck a cold chill to her heart.

"The baby, of course," he said, as if in answer to himself. "I cannot make her look back now, or the degradation of the past would kill her, poor thing. Right or wrong, wise or foolish, the baby must make it permanent."

Angela was getting puzzled and distressed. What baby?

"But perhaps—" he went on, and seemed to stop himself. "No, an accident makes nothing right. Right for me, wrong for everybody else. A pretty gospel to have in one's heart when one looks one's fellow-men in the face." He laughed bitterly.

Angela could not understand what he meant at all, and, frightened by the appearance of increasing delirium, smoothed his pillow once more, and forced herself to become calmer, lest her agitation should affect him.

The result seemed to justify her, for the patient became silent again, and closed his eyes to fall into what appeared a state of greater restfulness.

He seemed asleep when her breakfast appeared, and, for fear of disturbing him, she had the tray Mrs. Marlow had brought up placed in the next room, attacking the dainty repast with haste in her eagerness to get back to her charge.

Mrs. Marlow had stopped to chat, dropping her voice to a

whisper, because the door of the sick-room had been left open for Angela to hear if her patient moved.

"I really don't know what I should have done, ma'am, if you had not come," she was saying in a burst of gratitude. "I have never been used to nursing, and somehow the sight of anybody ill always takes my wits away. The doctor spoke of telegraphing to town for a trained nurse from one of the hospitals, but I hope you will not leave the poor master until she comes. You seem to have made him ever so much better already. He seems to be sleeping quite peaceful now. It made me feel that I couldn't do anything but cry to see him tossing about and muttering like he was; and such a good master as he has been to me too, and so brave, they tell me, he was at the fire," and the old lady began to wipe her eyes with her clean apron again.

"I think that we shall soon have him well," said Angela cheerfully.

"And you won't go away until the nurse comes, will you, ma'am?" said Mrs. Marlow earnestly. Angela shook her head.

"I shall not leave Mr. Lyne until he is quite convalescent. You can make a bed up for me in this room if you will, so that I can stay through the night."

The old lady's face filled with gratitude.

"You are very good and kind, ma'am. Dr. Cairn seemed afraid that you might not come at all, seeing that the master does not believe the same things as you believe or go to your church. But perhaps there won't be any need for you to trouble. If the doctor telegraphs as he said he would, the hospital nurse will be here before evening, I believe."

The doctor himself came in as she spoke. With his usual good sense and desire to save people trouble, he had let himself in, and walked up straight to the sick-room. He smiled when he saw the Rector's wife so evidently at home.

"Well, and how is our patient, Mrs. Presyllett?"

"Asleep," said Angela, and she followed him into the sick-room, watching him anxiously as he felt the sick man's pulse, and trying to read in his face that her own sanguine hopes were justified.

Mrs. Marlow had gone when they returned to the other room, and the doctor opened his lips.

"Capital!" he said in his brisk way. "Fever subsiding. Pulse more regular. We shall have our hero himself again in no time now. He has a splendid constitution, and will shake off the effects of his shock quickly. I should not be surprised if he is quite ready to take an interest in what is going on around him when he wakes. You must not let him talk too much, or be too eager to convert him to the faith, Mrs. Presyllett."

There was an amused twinkle in the old man's eye as he spoke, for he had heard a good deal of the girl's evangelical work, and had put down to proselytising zeal her evident eagerness to nurse the invalid Infidel.

Angela reddened a little, which was unusual for her, but did not answer.

"You spoke to Mrs. Marlow of sending for a hospital nurse," she said after a pause. "I hope you have not done so yet."

"No; I thought I would consult you first. There is still plenty of time, if you would like her to come. But your willingness to nurse our unbelieving hero made me think, after seeing you, that you might like him left in your charge altogether. It is certainly an opportunity you may not have again of making him see your side of the question—not that it seems to me to matter very much what a man believes, when he can act as Gabriel Lyne has done. I know you will think me a sad sinner, Mrs. Presyllett, but I can't help believing that our young friend would have had a better chance of heaven, if he had been killed last night, than many of the good church-goers who stood round fearing to risk their skins."

There was a twinkle in the old man's eye as he finished, for he rather enjoyed shocking the young lady's cocksure theology, and it was not the first time that he had done so. To his surprise, however, she made no attempt to defend it, or to insist on the need of belief in Christ as an absolute *sine qua non* of eternal salvation. All her mind seemed centred on the question of the nurse.

"I am glad that you have not sent for anybody," she said eagerly. "I should like to take complete charge of the case."

"Now, that is very good of you," he said briskly, making her flush a little with a vague feeling of hypocrisy. "I am sure that he could not be left in better hands, and I think we can trust Mrs. Marlow to look after the night-work. He won't want much attention then."

"I have asked the housekeeper to make me up a bed here," said Angela; and the doctor smiled again.

"Well, if you do not manage to make Lyne a good churchman when he gets better, you deserve to," he said; and the girl flushed again.

"I have no desire to make Mr. Lyne a churchman. I am only anxious for his recovery."

"Then you are a splendid little woman," he said, with the patronising enthusiasm of a warm-hearted old man, "and I think the church would have a hundred times more influence nowadays if all the parsons had wives like you."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she no longer considered herself a parson's wife, but she had decided in her mind to make no public announcement of her abandonment of the nominal marriage until she had submitted the question to Gabriel. She had accepted him unreservedly as her leader now, and was prepared to act entirely according to his decisions. Even to let Dr. Cairn think that she had any idea of changing the Infidel's creed seemed to her an act of unfaithfulness, and she forced herself to try and remove the impression.

"I think that Mr. Lyne is nearer to our Master than many who call themselves by His name," she said; and the old doctor patted her on the back in his fatherly fashion.

"That is just my idea, Mrs. Presyllett, and I am glad to hear you speak so sensibly. I'd bet on Lyne's chances at the last day against that of a good many who sing the creeds very loud every Sunday and never show a trace of their Christianity all the week. But I don't know what the Rector would say to us."

He gave a little laugh as he spoke, and then changed

the subject abruptly, as he saw from her face that the allusion to her husband's dislike and denunciation of the Infidel pained her.

"Well, I shall be happy to leave our hero in your charge," he said brightly, taking up his hat. "The only thing I was afraid of was that you might begin to bother the man about his soul too soon. Leave that alone, and you will have him well in no time."

Her face was quite bright again when she bid him "Good-bye," and she went back into the darkened room to sit by the side of the peacefully sleeping man again with her hand laid on his. She drew it away only when she remembered that Gabriel might be conscious when he woke, and gave up her mind to thoughts recalled by the doctor's words.

Surely belief in Jesus, the belief necessary to salvation, was not a matter of words or of mental effort at all. Words were nothing, and the effort to accept historical facts in the face of mental conviction was little more than dishonesty. Could God punish Gabriel for his honesty, and reward the Canon for considering only his eternal safety, and refusing, through fear and prejudice, to consider two sides of a question? Was not belief after all a matter not of the mind alone, but of the life; and the truest believer in Christ the one whose life was most Christ-like, whether he called himself Christian or not?

Although she did not realise the fact, she had accepted as an axiom of belief that Gabriel Lyne could not be damned, and her creed had to readjust itself to make the axiom tenable. She was encouraged by finding that her new definition of belief made her God more just. For the first time in her life she could let her mind dwell on the thousands and thousands of human beings who have lived and died without ever hearing, or having the chance of hearing, the name of Jesus. Were they all to be punished eternally by a just God for not having possessed the belief that was impossible to them? In the old days, when belief in Jesus had been the mental acceptance of an historical fact, and a favourable criticism of the character of Jesus as shown in the New Testament persisted in by an effort of prejudiced will, she had kept the thought of these



ignorant thousands of souls resolutely out of her mind, as a temptation of the Evil One to make her faith falter. She had told herself that God would see to the matter, and at the same time clung to a belief which made any adjustment on His part logically impossible.

But now Gabriel had become dearer to her than her creed, and she faced the facts of the universe boldly. If to call oneself a Christian was to ally oneself with those like Canon Presyllett, who had distorted every word and action of Christ's to make it justify their own self-righteousness, selfishness, and wickedness, surely it was more Christ-like to abandon the name altogether, as Gabriel had done. Why did people cling to the name? Was it through any devotion to Christ? Was it not only that the name had become a badge of respectability?

Angela thought of her aunts, whose Christianity and church-going was simply a department of their respectability, a desire to do what was correct and lady-like; and, in her independence and thirst for sacrifice, she felt hungry for the social ostracism which attends the infidel.

The passion which she felt for the condemnation of society was due to her worship of the person of Jesus, her desire to make her life as far as possible a counterpart of His. The fact that the renunciation of Christianity would make her, like Him, an opponent to the highly respectable religion of the day, frowned upon for her beliefs, tended to make the very following of Jesus demand that she should follow Him in a new manner unrecognised by so-called religious people and Christians. All professed Christians had become identified with the Pharisees of the Bible story, against whom her Lord's anger had been so unceasing. Was not Canon Presyllett a very type of the whited sepulchre, with his outward show of piety, and his heartless treatment of the poor from whom he drew his rents at Barnwood, with his insistence on all the outward forms of religion, with his bigoted hostility to any one who taught ideas different from his own?

The parallel was none the less pleasing to her because it made Gabriel occupy the position of Christ, irritating the Pharisees by teaching a purer and more living religion, and

denouncing the forms and shibboleths which had become the whole of religion to them.

There was nothing to disturb her thoughts in the sick-room, to which there intruded no sound from the world without. She was surprised when she heard from Mrs. Marlow, over her dinner, that the cottage had been inundated with callers. The news of Gabriel's heroism had spread far and wide, rousing the whole neighbourhood into a reaction in favour of the man they had avoided and spoken evil against. Even the Vicar of Hartle had driven over to leave his condolences and flowers.

The flowers were so plentifully spread out in the Infidel's study that they reminded Angela of her home-coming to the Rectory, and made her shudder in consequence. — Everybody with a vinery for miles round had sent grapes, including the Squire, who had been the first to call with his wife, and had left grumbling at the doctor's order, which forbade anybody to see his patient.

Mrs. Gateacre had come prepared to play the part of nurse, and was rather taken aback to find herself forestalled.

"Don't you think that I had better take her place?" she said to her husband in a whisper. "If Gabriel is as fond of her as you think, it seems rather unwise."

"Well, it can't do any harm while the poor fellow is delirious," said the Squire, who hated his wife to be out of the house even on an errand of mercy. "We will talk about it next week, when he is pulling round again. Not but that I would trust him absolutely then. He is a fine fellow, as true as steel."

He was feeling very proud that he had been the only one in Windlehurst to recognise the fact; and the justification of his faith in the Infidel made him ready to expose him confidently to new temptation.

"Besides, the girl is such a block of marble," said his wife. "I really do not see how he can care for her very much."

## CHAPTER XXXV

THE Reverend Canon Presyllett had not been among those who, forgiving Gabriel Lyne's opinions for the sake of his heroism, had called with presents and inquiries at "The Barn."

Although the old maids of Lilac Lodge had carried out their intention of returning to the Rectory, where they were shocked to see the Rector suffering from his wife's personal violence, and quite ready to agree with them that the honour of being made his wife had affected her mind, and although the Rector had been quite as much excited by the news they brought as the deeply commiserating ladies had anticipated, still he had let the day go by without taking any action.

When the old maids, after much private debating as to the propriety of the step, had remained to make breakfast for him, they left the house under the impression that he was starting for the Infidel's cottage at once, to insist on his revolted wife's return; but the Canon was in no haste to undertake the duty.

The Infidel's injuries, which had appeared to the Canon even more serious than they actually were, relieved him from any pressing fear of the man's influence on his wife, and he was very shy of being seen abroad in the daylight with his blackened eye.

But the real fact which made him hesitate was his knowledge that he had no influence at all over Angela. His authority as a husband she had never admitted, and he knew well enough that the scene of the morning had irretrievably robbed him of that spiritual authority as a minister which had enabled him for two days to triumphantly direct her actions. The exercise of brute force had left brute force the only weapon in his hands, and it was one to which he

was quite unaccustomed. He shrank from using it. Not that he felt any natural repugnance to brutality. A husband's authority must be maintained by any means that God has placed in his hand for that purpose, superior strength included. But violence was almost indissolubly connected with scandal, and the Rector shrank from public scandal even more sensitively than the old maids of Lilac Lodge themselves. An atmosphere of reverence and respect was necessary to his existence, it was the outward tribute to his holiness, on which his sense of holiness fed itself, and without which it could not long exist; and anything which threatened it appeared to him an offence against his soul, and against the religion which he officially represented. Any show of disrespect to himself, even in his most secular character, became in this way an irreligious injury to his God, to be warded off at all cost.

This attitude of thought enabled him to look upon Angela's desertion in what he considered a quite impersonal light. Putting his own pride and passion out of the question, he must resist it with all his power as a matter of religion. For a wife to resist the authority of her husband was a sin from which he must save Angela at all costs. If by resisting his authority she cast discredit upon a minister of God, the action was a direct offence against God Himself, to avoid which any means, any emotion became justified, even the passion which still consumed him.

His desire for the holiness of complete purity had been undermined by the fact that it was unrecognised by the parish. His attitude towards it was proving how close was the connection between his virtues and their public recognition, although he was far from realising the fact. He was only conscious that the delight of being holier than other men had decreased from the moment that his congregation began to credit him with the comparative purity of the ordinary married man.

The gradual change was brought to a head by his wife's desertion, and he no longer shrank from deliberately meditating the act which had become necessary to cement the tie she wished to sever, to secure her proper subjection to

his authority, and to save the earthly representative of God from being made to look ridiculous in the eyes of those whose respect for religion was bound up with their respect for himself.

Instead of feeling any shame for the weakness of the morning, he was beginning to look upon his fall as the direct leading of God, showing him that comparative impurity had become necessary for the salvation of his wife's soul and the avoidance of scandal. With his infatuated respect for coincidences, he had assured himself that the very fact of his continued temptation after the fire showed Divine approval of his surrender to it. The coincidence which had for the second time prevented the accomplishment of his purpose did not appeal to him; for coincidences are like texts and statistics: we must decide what we want to prove before we select the particular ones we need in order to prove it.

His idea of the sinfulness of consummating his marriage decreased in inverse ratio with the difficulties which prevented him doing so; and now that his wife had left him, the Beast ruled supreme in him, with no remonstrating voice from the Angel at all.

He sat all day long in his study in a state of distressing indecision between his hungry desire to get his wife back under his control, and a knowledge of his perfect impotence to do so without danger of a scandal. All day long he remained praying and thinking in the silent house, paying no attention to the few rings that came at the door-bell, and tasting no food.

As the early shades of evening began to close in, the fear of scandal faced him on both sides, and drove him into action. Even the dread of a public scene with his wife, which had kept him inactive all day, was conquered by the certainty of unkind gossip and suspicion if she remained a night away from his roof; and he gave orders to his one remaining servant to get ready the brougham, hoping as he did so that the man would not notice his blackened eye in the gloom of the stable-yard, where he had gone to give his order.

When the brougham was ready and he was being driven towards "The Barn," wild ideas came into his head of carrying

his wife back by main force with him; but for that, even if Angela were alone at the cottage, he would be forced to take his groom into his confidence, and the Rector shrank from giving the least opening to publicity. He must content himself with argument, and he prayed very fervently that God would give him persuasiveness to conquer His handmaiden's stubbornness and rebellion towards the husband into whose charge He had given her.

On reaching the door of the Infidel's home he was annoyed to find Dr. Cairn just coming out, and he would have passed him without a word if the old man had not stopped him.

"I must congratulate you, Canon," he burst out energetically, "on having a wife like Mrs. Presyllett. I tell her that the church would have a hundred times more influence than it has if all our clergy had wives like her. It is not many women who would have come at a moment's notice to nurse an outsider like Lyne. And such a capital nurse too. A good many men might wish they were in your shoes, Canon."

The clergyman answered abruptly, keeping his head down so that the rim of his hat shadowed his face and concealed its injuries. The unconscious irony of the congratulation cut him, but it brought also a sense of welcome relief. So far, at any rate, there appeared to have been no suspicion of scandal. His wife's attendance on the injured Infidel had only been taken as part of her well-known charitableness, and even reflected some credit upon himself. The realisation calmed him a little, but he was trembling with excitement to see her, and learn how far his influence with her had really been lost. A delicious hope had flashed into his mind that, after all, her resistance might have been, as he had thought at first, due only to the shock of maidenly instinct, and that he might find her ready to repent of her unkindness and violence.

He left the doctor talking, and hastened into the beautifully furnished hall, to meet Mrs. Marlow, who was coming from the kitchen with a pillow in her hand which she had been airing for Angela's bed.

The taste displayed everywhere did not come as a shock to him, as it had done to his wife on her first visit of conversion.

The Infidel's wealth, education, and polish were all known to him, and only increased his hatred of the man, since they increased his power of undermining his own influence in the parish. He barely glanced at the ferns and curios as he advanced to the old housekeeper.

"I wish to see Mrs. Presyllett," he said peremptorily; and Mrs. Marlow dropped her pillow on the lowest stair, to smooth her irreproachable apron before answering.

"I am sure she will be glad to see you, sir, after being alone all day with nobody to speak to but me. I am sure it was very good and kind of her to do so much for my poor master; not but that everybody has been very kind."

She was opening the door of Gabriel's study as she spoke, anxious to display the floral tributes to her master's heroism spread out on the table.

"Everybody has been calling," she ran on proudly, with a sweep of her plump hand towards the flowers and fruit. "Those large grapes are from the Squire, and Captain Benson sent that great bunch of lilies."

The Rector turned away impatiently. He had only looked into the room in expectation of seeing his wife there, and the sight of the flowers wounded him. A tribute to the Infidel appeared to him a personal insult to himself, an irreligious contempt of the doctrines he preached.

"But where is my wife?" he said sharply; and Mrs. Marlow took up her aired pillow again.

"I will tell her that you are here, sir. I am sure I don't know how we should have managed if she had not come so kindly. I am not used to nursing myself, and somehow the sight——"

The Canon interrupted her. A fear was on him lest Angela should refuse to see him, and he followed the housekeeper up the stairs.

"I will not give Mrs. Presyllett the trouble of coming down," he said, making an attempt to regain his calm pastoral manner.

Mrs. Marlow turned undecidedly.

"The doctor says nobody is to go near the sick-room, sir. But perhaps Mrs. Presyllett is in the next room, where she

is going to sleep to-night. I am just making her a bed there. She was having her tea there when I left her. But you must speak low, please, for fear of disturbing the poor master. He has been asleep all day, and Dr. Cairn says he must not be waked on any account. He says the sleep will do him more good than all the medicine in the world."

The Canon bit his thin loose lip, but did not answer. And so his wife was intending to spend the night under this man's roof.

As Mrs. Marlow had suggested, Angela was taking tea in the room outside the sick-chamber. The place was almost dark, but she had the meal laid close by the window instead of having a lamp lighted. The mysterious dusk suited her thoughts, and she did not want them disturbed. She rose at the entrance of a visitor, and glanced towards the open door dividing her from the sick-room. But when she recognised the gaunt figure of the Canon in the gloom, she did not close the door. She felt a sense of protection in the nearness of Gabriel, even when he was ill and asleep.

The Canon stood waiting for the housekeeper's departure, but Angela called her as she was leaving them.

"You need not go, Mrs. Marlow. Canon Presyllett cannot have anything to say to me of a private nature, and the bed wants arranging."

She was surprised that the man had the effrontery to meet her, and was determined that he should see that argument was out of question between them.

The Canon controlled himself with an effort, and turned to the old lady with an attempted smile.

"Mrs. Presyllett is mistaken. Our talk will be quite confidential."

He was holding the door open for her, and the good lady was making a hurried flight without glancing at Angela, when the girl called to her again—

"Perhaps you will wait outside then, Mrs. Marlow. I shall want you directly."

She was telling herself that it would be better to have the interview, on which the Canon seemed so determined, over and done with. She would tell him in few words that any



claim he might have had upon her owing to her promise, had been forfeited by his conduct, and that henceforth she held him a complete stranger.

The Canon waited until the door was closed behind the wondering old lady, and then advanced to the window where Angela's stately figure outlined itself against the light, holding out his hand.

"Please stay where you are, Canon Presyllett, or I shall have to call the housekeeper back," said Angela quietly; and he stopped abruptly.

"My dear child," he said, curbing his irritation to speak in the pulpit tone, tempered by tenderness, which had become now more loathsome to her than any other, "we cannot go on like this. It will cause a public scandal."

"The scandal is of your making. It does not affect me."

"But it affects me, and it will affect yourself more than you imagine if you persist in this sinful hostility to the husband in whose charge God has placed you. For the sake of your eternal welfare, as well as for your temporary happiness, I must point out to you that your conduct will prove disastrous if you continue it. At present nobody but your aunts, who will remain silent in their love of you, have gained the slightest suspicion that you have used personal violence to me, the marks of which I carry on my face still, that you have left my roof vowing never to return, that in volunteering to nurse this man of sin you have thought to place yourself under the protection of a lover. I beg and plead with you that you will let me reason you into a calmer frame of mind, a frame of mind in which you will realise the heinousness of such actions, and long to return to the shelter of my roof, and a place among the humble servants of our Lord, which is still open to you. Will you not at least join me in prayer that God may open your eyes to the true character of your offence?"

He was ready to drop on his knees and avail himself of the trick of argument which had always stood him in good stead, but her cold quiet voice stopped him.

"Your blasphemy shocks me, Canon Presyllett, and only makes me shudder to think that I could ever have taken you

for a true servant of our Lord, or listened to a single word of yours as inspired by Him."

It was as he had feared. His spiritual influence was lost, and he tried to fall back on the girl's fear of scandal and disgrace.

"You misjudge me cruelly, my child," he said. "I am afraid that you have been very much influenced by this man whom God has thought fit to lay low for his sins."

Her face flushed, but she controlled the impulse to say that Gabriel had been laid low by his own act of splendid Christ-like heroism. The man must know it. What was the good of wasting words on such a creature?

"But we must understand each other," he went on. "You cannot forget that you are my wife, or ignore the opinion which the world will form of your action if you leave my roof."

Angela smiled. The opinion of the world! As though that mattered, when her conscience directed her so clearly. The opinion of the world, which made a fetish of the marriage service, however it was accepted, and which would applaud her no doubt if she gave herself up to this loathsome blasphemer, the very sight of whom made her recoil! The idea seemed to her all part of that anti-Christian creed she had rejected, the creed which worshipped forms and names, but never Christ.

She had grown so certain that the old creed was wrong, and the new one right, which made Gabriel and not the Rector personify Christ for her, that she did not feel a single qualm of fear or hesitation.

"We ought to understand one another, as you say, Canon Presyllett," she answered, in her calm, clear voice. "The position is very plain to me. For some reason you wished to marry, and instead of selecting a woman who cared for you, if such can exist, you took advantage of my foolish childish notion that there was something wrong and sinful in ordinary love and marriage, to make me go through the ceremony with you under the idea that I was simply taking a vow against marriage. I thought that we were to be married in the sight of men, unmarried in the sight of God. That was our agree-

ment. My faith in that agreement having placed me in your power, you thought it time to declare my idea of the sinfulness of love and marriage erroneous, and actually think now that the ceremony into which you enticed me by false pretences will make me consider myself really your wife. You seem to think that such a ceremony will make me consider a union with a man I hate and despise more holy than a real companionship with one I honour and love. The world may consider it so, but a thousand worlds would not make me think it. When your own enunciation assured me that my heart and conscience were right in telling me that real love is a God-given and holy emotion, I thought that my promise to you might still compel me to keep to our agreement, and appear to be your wife in the eyes of the world; but the moment you broke our agreement by claiming a right to me body and soul, I saw quite clearly that my only course was to renounce the ceremony into which you entrapped me by fraud and blasphemy, and declare myself no more your wife in the eyes of the world than in the eyes of God. It is perfectly useless for you to try and persuade me that I am wrong, and it can only be painful to us to see each other or speak to each other again. I am surprised that you dared to do so after revealing to me the wickedness and loathsomeness of your character."

He had stood quite motionless while she spoke, warned by the movement she made to call the housekeeper when he had moved. Now her contempt stung him into fury, and he reached her and seized her wrist.

"Godless woman," he said fiercely. "You know that it is only your love for this cursed atheist which has changed you."

"I do not deny it," she said, as quietly as before. "I thank God that I have loved him, and learnt so much from my love."

Then she raised her voice—

"Mrs. Marlow."

The housekeeper came in instantly with a lamp she had been lighting outside in her hand, and behind her Squire Gateacre.

The Canon stood blinking in the light, perfectly impotent. Every argument had failed him, and the final one of brute force which had suggested itself was rendered impossible by the appearance of the Squire, who certainly would not stand by and see the girl carried down to the brougham against her will.

Mr. Gateacre stood looking curiously from husband to wife. He must have gathered from his excited voice that they were engaged in a dispute.

The overpowering dread of a scandal made the Rector collect himself.

"Well, good-night, dear," he said to his wife. "I will call again in the morning. You must think over what I have said."

Then to the Squire—

"How do you do, Squire. I was just going. I have been trying to persuade my wife that night-nursing will knock her up, but she is self-willed as usual."

With a nod to Mrs. Marlow he was gone, grinding his teeth at the thought of his impotence.

"And he is not ashamed to lie before me," said Angela to herself, shocked by this final untruth, which to him was too necessary to be considered.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

It was the third time in the day that the good-natured Squire had called at "The Barn," and receiving no answer to his light tap at the door, he had entered, to lose himself in the puzzle of bedrooms, and be found by Mrs. Marlow just as he had given the puzzle up.

"Well, and how is your patient getting on, Mrs. Presyllett?" he said, trying to sink his bluff voice a little, out of respect to the imagined nearness of the sick man.

"Asleep still," said Angela.

"Then there won't be any harm in my having a look at him," said the Squire, who was anxious to assure himself beyond doubt that his friend was really as well as the doctor made out; but Angela shook her head like the good nurse that she was.

"It is too dark for you to see him without a light, and the lamp might wake him."

There was no arguing against her mandate, and Mr. Gateacre had to content himself with her confirmation of Dr. Cairn's report.

"I should like to take back word to Rachel that he is conscious," he said. "If you think that he will wake before long, I will just smoke a pipe downstairs and wait for news."

When he had gone, Angela, impatient of the delay which had kept her from Gabriel's side, returned at once to the sick-room. She bent over him to assure herself that he was still asleep, and, deceived by his quietness, had gone across to the fire, which was burning low, when the sound of his voice made her start.

"Little Nun."

She was at his side in a moment.

"It is I—Angela Gaydon," she said, glad to shake off the last sign of her hated compact and resume her maiden name. "You were hurt at the fire, and I have come to nurse you."

"Then I have not been dreaming?" he said, and his voice assured her that he was perfectly conscious. "I almost thought that the dream was too good to be real. Did I hear Canon Presyllett speaking to you before the Squire came?"

His voice had a thrill of eagerness which made her heart beat wildly. She was asking herself what he had heard, and what he would think of it all. She strained her eyes to see his face, but the darkness over his bed was too intense for her to read his expression. The fire which she had just stirred into flame cast a fitful glow on her own figure, but seemed only to make the darkness more intense where he lay.

"Yes, Canon Presyllett has been here," she said, her voice trembling a little. "I forgot to close the door. Did our voices wake you?"

"I think so, but I am glad if it did. What I heard suggested a miracle, and I have been trying to realise it, asking myself whether my longing has not made me dream. Did I hear you say that your marriage was only a compact entered into between you with an understanding that it should not be a real marriage?"

"Yes."

"Did I hear you admit that you cared for somebody else?"

Her silence alone answered him. His uninjured hand was seeking for hers, and he put it to his lips and kissed it. And then, Angela did not know whether his hand had drawn her down or whether the impulse was her own, but the next moment her lips had met his in a long perfect kiss.

A new delicious rapture was in her heart, and still it seemed the most natural thing that they should have kissed each other, that his uninjured hand should be stroking her hair as it gleamed in the firelight. To Gabriel, too, there seemed no strangeness, although the reality of her love was so wonder-

ful to him; his own sympathy had enabled him to see so clearly its possibility; the scene had been repeated so often in his rebellious day-dreams.

"And now, little girl," he said, after a long, delicious pause of perfect confidence and content, "you must tell me how you learnt to care for me. It seems a miracle that I can scarcely yet believe. I think I fell in love with you from the first moment that we met that day in the Rectory garden. Do you remember?"

Angela did not answer. The instinct of the nurse conquered even her desire to do so, to hear him speak again.

"Dr. Cairn says that I am not to let you talk, dear. You must not forget that you are very ill, and were quite delirious twelve hours ago. You must lie quite still and try to go to sleep again."

"Sleep? Not I, sweetheart. Every word you speak to me helps to make me well. Tell me again that you really love me. It seems too good to be true. You have seen so little of me, and I was such a bear to you. You know, I thought that you were really married to Presyllett. Even then it was desperately hard to give up the thought of you, for I knew that we were made for one another. We did not need to fall in love, did we, Angela?"

His low voice lingered tenderly over her name, and her heart thrilled to hear it for the first time from his lips.

How sweetly strange it was, and yet how perfectly natural. The only strangeness seemed to be that they could ever have spoken together without this perfect confidence. All the instinct of self-ownership and self-seclusion, which makes women shy and half rebellious even when a stronger instinct has made them bestow love and confidence on the man who claims it, had been conquered and exhausted in her by her long debates with herself. Before they had met here, she had given herself heart and soul and body to her lover, and not a single rebellious instinct remained to be conquered by his wooing.

She answered him with a kiss, and then tried to speak severely.

"I cannot let you talk, Gabriel. I want you to get better

very quickly. There is so much help and advice that I want you to give me, but I shall wait till you are quite strong and Dr. Cairn has given you permission to talk."

"What a despot you are," he said with gentle playfulness. "I am sure that I am quite well enough to talk as much as I like. Talking is better than wondering, and there is so much for me to wonder over. And won't you bring in a light, dear? I do want to look at my beautiful Nun, now that she belongs to me."

"Why do you call me a Nun?" she asked, pained by the remembrance of her past unnaturalness.

"It was the name I gave you when I did not know any other, that day I first met you in the Rectory garden. Don't you like it?"

"Only because you have given it to me. I was foolish to try and please God by dressing oddly." How many confessions and confidences they had to make to each other, as they talked in the firelight, forgetting everything except that they were together with no bar now to stand in the way of their perfect understanding.

It was Angela who broke off suddenly, remembering the doctor's written orders.

"You are making me forget all my duties. I have to give you something to eat. Dr. Cairn will not trust me to nurse you if I am so forgetful."

He caught her hand.

"You are not going away?"

"I must tell Mrs. Marlow what to make. And the poor Squire has been waiting a long time to hear that you are conscious. I had quite forgotten him. He has been here three times, and everybody has been very kind. Your study is full of flowers and fruit they have brought you. You are the hero of the hour, Gabriel."

"I am glad Gateacre is here. I have something to say to him, if you will send him up."

"But you are not to talk."

"It will not take me many moments to say all I have to say, and if I do not, the thought of it will keep me awake and prevent me resting. I want to tell him why you have left the



Rectory, if I may, and ask him to help me, while I am on my back, to take care of you."

"I do not want anybody but you."

"But you do not mind my telling him what has happened, dearest?"

"I should be glad for everybody to know that I have ceased to carry the name of that horrible man. But you must not excite yourself talking, dear. For my sake you will act sensibly."

Even the instinct of the nurse enabled her no longer to maintain her peremptory tone towards her leader. She felt as though he in his wisdom must know best even what was right for his health, and when she had gone down to give her orders for her invalid's repast, she rejoiced the anxious Squire by telling him that Gabriel was awake, conscious and asking for him.

Mr. Gateacre's face brightened, and he knocked the ashes out of his pipe hurriedly in the empty grate of the study, where he had been marching up and down smoking impatiently.

"Oh! you need not be afraid, Mrs. Presyllett," he said in answer to Angela's hesitating permission. "I shall not let Lyne bother himself or talk much. I shall just cheer him up by telling him what we all think of him, and that I have decided to back him up over the Sunday opening question. That will please him, and it's as little as I can do after the noble way in which he has proved his character."

"I can only give you five minutes," said Angela, with the calm imperativeness of the nurse; but the rosiness of her cheeks, and the smile which came into her beautiful eyes at the mention of Gabriel's heroism, made the Squire think her more human and pleasing than ever.

"It is hard on Lyne," he said, as he stepped with attempted lightness up the pretty staircase, and tried to remember the clue to the bedroom puzzle. "I wonder whether I ought to have let Rachel take her place, but it strikes me the young lady would want some persuading before she would give up her duties."

Gabriel had not expressed any wish to see the Squire alone, but Angela shrank from hearing her foolish compact discussed

before him, and had decided to leave the two men together. Whatever revelation had to be made was in Gabriel's hands, and she knew that she could leave it safely there.

When the Squire had left her for the interview she went into the kitchen, to help Mrs. Marlow prepare the invalid's meal, with a feeling almost of jealousy that her ignorance of domestic matters would not enable her to do it all alone. The ignorance appeared to her for the first time as something lamentable, something that made her worse than other women, and she pleased the old housekeeper by taking a childlike interest in the making of a rice pudding.

Meanwhile, the Squire, finding his way with some difficulty to the still darkened sick-room, had been cheered by hearing his friend's voice, sounding scarcely different from what it had done when he was in full health.

"Here I am, Squire. You might bring a light in with you from the other room, so that we can see each other. Thanks. I have one hand for you, you see, although the other must be considerably damaged, from the amount of padding on it—and the feel. If it were not for that, I should be wanting to get up."

He had been shaking the elder man's hand with his uninjured one as he spoke, and the two friends remained looking at one another in the lamp-light.

"By Jove, you have had a narrow shave, Lyne," said the Squire, looking with admiration at his scarred face and singed hair. "Didn't it make you feel a bit nervous as to what might come after death?"

"No, I had not time to think about it. Getting to that old woman took me all my time. How is she? I haven't heard anything yet."

Mr. Gateacre hesitated.

"If your nurse has not told you, perhaps I ought not to."

"Stuff," said Gabriel. "My nurse and I had something better to talk about. The poor old woman is dead, then?"

"Yes, but you did a plucky thing in trying to save her."

"Well, I should not like to think that nobody tried. What happened? The floor fell in, didn't it?"

"The house, just as the firemen came. They fished you

out of the ruins with the old woman still in your arms. But they think she was suffocated before you reached her."

"And is my arm broken? It feels as if it might be anything."

"No, only burnt. You didn't break a limb. Miracle, Cairn calls it. Everybody is very proud of you."

"And you have been calling three times. It is good of you, Squire, and I am glad that you are here now, as I have a favour to ask of you, and I don't expect Angela will give me much time to say it in."

The Squire felt a momentary surprise at the use of the Christian name, but the chance of doing a favour to the man for whom he was dying to show his appreciation crowded it into the background of his mind.

"Favour," he said. "I will do anything on earth for you, Lyne, less than change my creed. I felt this morning ready to do that, if I could make you better by doing it."

Gabriel smiled. The Squire's affection touched him.

"I am going to make almost as big a demand on your trust in my opinions," he said more earnestly, "and I warn you that you will find all your prejudices ranged against me. I want you to help me in keeping Mrs. Presyllett, as she was called, out of the Rector's way. I am laid on my back, or I should not need anybody's help. As it is, I think that the poor girl wants more protection than I can give her, and if you can only see things in the right light, you are the one man round that I could implicitly trust her to."

"But, my dear boy, they are man and wife," burst out the Squire, forgetting all about his promise to Angela to keep calm. "Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

"But God does not happen to have joined this couple together," said Gabriel quietly. "You remember the idea of the marriage which you suggested to me on the Barnwood Road. I thought it was a mad idea on your part, but it was a true one."

"Then I win my bet with Rachel," said the Squire, quite enthusiastic over the confirmation of his opinion. "Did the girl know what the idea of the marriage was?"

"She would not have married him under any other condi-

tion. She had some idea, poor girl, that love and marriage were unholy, and went through the ceremony as a sort of initial rite to making the Rectory a convent. It was fully agreed between them before the ceremony that they were to be married in the sight of men, unmarried in the sight of God. The Canon, as you may guess, is wanting to break the agreement, and Angela, now that her eyes are open, wants to renounce the marriage altogether."

"And marry you?" said the Squire abruptly.

Gabriel had raised himself on his free arm to speak better, and he nodded assent. For Angela's kiss had meant to him all that a good woman's kiss must mean.

"But she can't, man. Whatever they said to each other, they were really married, and nothing can unmarry them."

"That is where we differ, and where I think that your prejudice comes in," said Gabriel, trying to speak calmly, but feeling hot and flushed. The knowledge that Angela would certainly put an end to the interview if she saw him so, made him more eager than ever to settle the matter before she returned. "To me the ceremony is nothing. The purpose for which it was entered into and the result are everything. I am ready to admit that a real marriage cannot be renounced. The children, or the chance of children, must make it permanent, however foolishly it was entered into. You will bear me witness, Squire, that I never entertained the idea for a moment of stealing Presyllett's wife, when I considered her really his wife. My concern for society and for her prevented me. But to attack this empty form is to join with society in rejecting a fraud which has been practised upon it. Presyllett has obtained its sanction to an unnatural and undesirable partnership by pretending that the partnership was one which society recognises. He has misused the ceremony, and the ceremony becomes nothing. As a civil contract, I do not think that the law will hold it binding. I want you to introduce Angela to a first-class solicitor, to institute for her a suit for nullity of marriage, on the ground that the contract was entered into for a purpose for which it was never intended, and that the marriage has never been and was never intended to be consummated. Will you do

this for me, and in the meanwhile consider the marriage as under discussion, guarding Angela, if need be, from the Rector, as from a man who possibly is not her husband in the sight of the law?"

The Squire was pushing his hand through his hair, in troubled indecision.

"When you put it in that way, it seems nothing to promise," he said; "but it is the way you put it. Other people will say that I am encouraging a woman to make light of the marriage law, and defy the authority of the husband to whom she has been joined by all the holy rites of the church. And that is a thing I should not like to do."

"But the rites of the church are not holy if they are used by a man to entrap a girl into a union she never meditates," said Gabriel hotly, excited by the feeling that his strength was oozing out before he had gained for Angela a champion. "Take it as a legal question, Squire, and leave the marriage as a thing not decided until the law has spoken."

"And suppose the law says that the marriage is binding?"

"Then the law may go to the devil, and I shall trust my opinion against that of the judge or jury who has tried the case; but that will be a matter for myself alone. By that time I shall be myself again, and ask nobody to share my responsibility. Promise me, Squire, that you will take my view of it till then, and I can rest easy and give my mind to getting well; but, by Jove, if I am chained here knowing that the poor girl has not a single friend in the world, I shall drive myself into a fever with worry. I shall have to keep her here under my eye, for fear that fiend of a parson gets hold of her; and you know how that would set people talking against her. I can stand a good deal of talking against myself, but it would be sure to hurt her, although she is so brave."

"Do you want me to take her home with me, then?"

"That is the great favour I wanted to ask. I dare not send her to her aunts if they would take her, because they are completely under Presyllett's thumb."

"I don't know what Rachel would say."

"Mrs. Gateacre has a heart, man. You could appeal to her sympathies by telling her that Angela and I love each other

as you two love each other. You can appeal to her respect for the proprieties by threatening to drive my little girl back here if she cannot give her a home. You can tell her that it is a question that the law is to decide; for the law is as sacred to her as the marriage service, and she has no morbid admiration for the Rector. I can trust Mrs. Gateacre, if you will only show her the matter in its right light."

He had rested for a moment, in his excitement, on his burnt arm, and the excruciating pain which shot through it made him feel sick and dizzy, but he struggled against the weakness which was overpowering him, and which threatened to end the appeal before he had gained his point.

The struggle was a vain one, and he sank back fainting just as Angela came in with a plate of the Squire's grapes in her hand, and a bunch of flowers at her neck, which she had chosen from the study table. She had been arranging her hair loosely too at the glass there, so that its natural waywardness showed itself.

The picture she made kneeling by his side with her beautiful eyes full of tearful concern was a very beautiful one, as Gabriel saw it when he recovered from his weakness. The Squire had gone, despatched hurriedly for smelling-salts and stimulants.

He came bustling back very much ashamed of himself; and, awed by the sight of Angela's devotion as she knelt by the bed with her soul in her eyes, he advanced to the table on tiptoe, and turned to speak only as he reached the door.

"It is all right, Lyne. I will do everything you wish. I will wait in the study till Mrs. Presyllett is ready."

"Miss Gaydon," corrected Gabriel, and held out his hand. "Thank you, Squire. I thought you would be a friend in need."

The Squire took it and wrung it silently, afraid to speak after the practical warning he had received.

There were tears in his eyes as he stole out of the room on tiptoe.

"I always said that they were made for one another. Lyne must be right."

When he was gone, Angela knelt silently by his side, still

wiping his forehead with her handkerchief steeped in *eau de Cologne*.

Gabriel had closed his eyes with a sense of dreamy content, and opened them again for the greater happiness of seeing her beautiful face tender with solicitude for him, its wavy frame of red-gold lit by the soft glow of the lamp.

"You are very very beautiful, darling," he said, with a sigh of happiness; and the sound of his voice loosened her lips.

"You are not going to send me away?" she said pleadingly.

"Yes, dearest, till to-morrow. The Squire is going to give you a bed at the Hall, and be your guardian while I am too weak to defend you; but to-morrow we shall have a whole day together, and the next day and the next."

"But I do not want to leave you at all, loved one," she said, stroking the singed hair back from his forehead tenderly. "Mrs. Marlow has made up a bed for me in the next room, and I do not want anybody to nurse you but myself."

He was about to make concern for her health an easy excuse to satisfy her, when the thought of the perfect confidence which was between them prevented even this slight falsehood.

"It would not matter if we did not love each other, little woman," he said, caressing her hair, "and if we were not going to get married; but we must make some concession to the rules of etiquette for lovers."

"Etiquette," she repeated, with a surprise that was almost scorn in her voice.

Gabriel smiled faintly.

"Yes, dear. Even the laws of etiquette register the experience and opinion of a great many people. Even if we know that the law is unnecessary for ourselves, that is no excuse for breaking it, unless we feel that it is unnecessary for other people. Nothing is more dangerous than to have a law for ourselves and another for the rest of the world. The rest of the world is right in resenting it, and their resentment hurts unless we are supported by the knowledge that we have gained it by upholding some grander principle than the world has admitted."

His gentle slow-spoken words sounded like music in her

ears, and the authority with which they were uttered, springing from a mine of perfectly honest unselfish thought, gave her a pleasant sense of help to come in all her mental difficulties. She did not see clearly the bearing that they had upon the question at issue. In his sensitive dread of contrasting too roughly her perfect natural purity with the coarser proprieties to which he was making her submit, he intentionally spoke rather vaguely to satisfy her that he had a reason for his step rather than to show clearly what his reason was.

He smiled again when he saw the look of instinctive rebellion fade from her face.

"I have a great great deal to learn," she said humbly. "Until I have learnt it, I will take your word in everything. I will go with Squire Gateacre if you wish."

"That is right, little one. I will explain more clearly some day why I wished it. What time is it?"

She took her watch, the gold watch that had been her mother's, from the bosom of her dress.

"Almost seven."

"And they retire early at the Hall. Well, we can have two more delicious hours together, darling, and then you must go. Will you tell the Squire that you will be ready at nine, and ask Mrs. Marlow to lay supper for him in the study? Perhaps you will take it with him."

She shook her head, with tears in her eyes at the thought of the coming parting.

"I could not waste any of my precious two hours."

She seemed reluctant even to leave him to carry down his message, and was glad that Mrs. Marlow saved her from doing so by bringing in the sick man's meal.

After it was done she seated herself by his side to push back again the singed curls from his forehead, while he talked—she could not keep him from talking, when he had so much to say—in his low musical voice, about the future, trying to make her see the necessity of the technical steps which they must take to secure if possible the sanction of society to their union.

"Of course, the decision of a possibly prejudiced judge cannot make you married or unmarried, darling," he said in



his tone of gentle persuasion; "whatever the world says, we know that we belong to one another and to nobody else. But if we can get society to agree with us, it will save us"—he thought only of her while he spoke—"from a certain amount of martyrdom, and there is no virtue in martyrdom for its own sake. An honest man or woman finds plenty that is inevitable without taking that which is unnecessary. Besides, no man can do a single action without affecting others. No man can live for himself alone, and we must not let our marriage persuade people that we think a real marriage ought to be ignored."

Angela sat very silently, with many questions in her mind that she would have asked had she not been afraid of making him speak too much. The truths he taught were very new to her, accustomed as she had been to deny the right of any earthly opinion to come between her and the dictates of her God as she drew them from the Bible or direct inspiration. But even while her old creed protested, her faith in Gabriel was stronger than her faith in any opinion she had ever held, and she told herself that only her ignorance kept her yet from seeing why Gabriel was right. The infallibility of his judgments was a matter of faith, of religion with her.

He felt that he must warn her against the probable reception which she would receive from Mrs. Gateacre.

"I know that you are very brave, dear," he said gently. "I want to appeal to your bravery against your pride. Until we have asked society through the law to sanction your abandonment of the nominal marriage to Presyllett, you will find a little of that martyrdom I have spoken about. You will find people thinking that you are doing very wrong. The Squire was doubtful at first as to whether he was right in helping us. Mrs. Gateacre has still to be persuaded, and I want you for my sake, little woman, to put up with some possible coldness from her. Remember that she knows very little of what has happened. When she does understand I know that she will give you a hearty welcome. I want you to promise that you will be patient until then."

"I will do anything you wish, dear," said Angela quite meekly. "I am sure that anything you direct must be right."

He smiled at the imputation of his infallibility.

"Be sure that it is the best that I can think, dear, although of course it may be all wrong."

"It is nine o'clock," said Angela, drawing in her breath.

"So soon. Then it must be 'Good-night,' darling—till to-morrow."

"Good-night, dear love."

Her arm was round his neck. Her lips met his again in a long passionate kiss. When she had torn herself away, her eyes were full of the tears which she could no longer restrain.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

VILLAGE rumour was not long in noticing, and trying, with that licence which want of information gives to the imagination, to explain the fact of Angela's continued absence from the Rectory.

What was actually known was that the Rector's wife spent her days nursing the hero of the hour, the Infidel of Windlehurst; that the rest of her time was spent at the Hall, which she left early every morning for "The Barn," returning late every evening in the Squire's brougham. The passage of the closed carriage through the village street had become an event to look for and watch with bated breath, as part of a domestic drama.

What was generally believed, and therefore confidently stated, was that Mrs. Presyllett, with that independence of her husband's authority which the Canon had admitted in apologising to his wealthier parishioners for her evangelical zeal, had decided to nurse and convert the Infidel in flat contradiction to Canon Presyllett's will; that there had been a stormy scene between the two, which ended in the Rector declaring that, if Mrs. Presyllett did not give up the nursing at once, she should never come back to the Rectory at all.

Accepting this as the true explanation of the mystery of the Rectory, as they began to call it in Windlehurst, public opinion inclined very much to the side of the wife. Even those good men who shook their heads most disapprovingly over her want of submission to the authority of her husband, admitted that the Rector appeared to be acting rather harshly. The reaction in favour of Gabriel, whose heroism had made it possible to suggest even in the politest and most respectable society that his works had a high moral tone, that his life

appeared to be blameless and his charity remarkable, helped to make local opinion run in favour of the woman who had decided to nurse him, rather than of the man who wanted him left alone.

It was perhaps this reaction which, together with the countenance given to Mrs. Presyllett by the Squire and his wife, prevented a word of scandal being suggested against the Infidel and his devoted nurse. Perhaps the miracle—for it is a miracle in a little country society to find an opening for scandal, however small, which is not taken advantage of—needed also for its explanation the reputation of being something colder than humanity which had attached itself to the devout wife of the Rector.

Whatever the cause, Angela had become somewhat of a heroine, whose independence was certainly deplored in many quarters, but against whose fair name not even a good woman suggested a suspicion.

The Rector had helped to divert sympathy from himself by disappearing. The groom had been sent away, on the night following the fire, for a holiday he did not want; and when, on the Sunday, the "Mystery" attracted to the church a larger congregation than had attended it since the sensational mission services, the good people found their eagerness to gaze on the hero of a domestic drama disappointed, and got only the dullest of sermons from a stranger, and the knowledge that they had put another church attendance to their credit with God, to reward them for their trouble. The Rector did not appear morning or evening. When the most inquisitive of the flock called at the Rectory, to find the blinds down and their ring at the bell disregarded, it became an accepted fact that the good man had gone away, although nobody had noticed the departure. The rumour that his gaunt figure had been seen after nightfall lurking in the darkness of the Hartle lane, being a true one, was rejected by common consent as fiction, but repeated nevertheless as an interesting feat of imagination on the part of its originator.

The interest which was taken in the *dramatis personæ* of the "Mystery," robbed of satisfaction by the non-appearance of the Rector and the isolation of Angela at "The Barn," where

she never showed herself to the fresh numbers who called to inquire after her patient in the hope of seeing her, raised even the heroine's aunts to a position of importance; and the fact that the little Tomtits had cut the Squire and his wife dead on the Barnwood Road was reported everywhere as an event. It was evident that they were not on the side of their niece, a fact which they emphasised by refusing to discuss her.

The little old maids had passed through a period of almost overwhelming mental activity. After leaving the abandoned Rector with many expressions of sympathy on the morning of the fire, they had spent the rest of the day agreeing with one another that they could not possibly give the revolted wife a home with them, only to be piqued at the end of it by finding that Angela had no intention of asking them to do so. Susannah brought in word that she had been seen driving to the Hall with the Squire.

They were very indignant at the news, which robbed them of the "unhappy duty," as they called it to each other, of maintaining the sacredness of marriage in spite of their affection for their niece. Prudence had prepared and elaborated the speech with which she would meet Angela at the door, and Iphigenia's face had been stern all day in unconscious rehearsal of the promised scene. And now all their enthusiasm for the holy state of matrimony and its duties was thrown away.

"Angela does not appear to have any idea of what is due to her relatives," said Prudence severely.

"She does not seem to have any human affection at all," chirped in her sister.

"She is ready to take the protection of any stranger rather than that of her father's sisters," went on Prudence, waiving the fact that they had decided to refuse her admittance. "I suppose our home is too humble for her."

The next morning another question had arisen for their discussion. Iphigenia came down to breakfast with a face full of thought.

"I have not been able to sleep," she explained in answer to her sister's solicitude, "for thinking of poor Adrian left all alone in his big cheerless house without a single servant to

wait on him, and deserted by the wife who ought to attend to all his needs."

"I have been thinking of him too, and I really do not see why we shouldn't," said Prudence, whose knowledge of her sister made words almost unnecessary between them. "Of course we should both have to go. People are so talkative that I should scarcely like to go alone, even though he is a married man and our own nephew—by marriage. But if we both went?"

"And I really think that we might trust Susannah to mind the house while we are away," added Iphigenia. "Of course we should be home every evening."

"Of course," said Prudence, who had noticed a suspicion of indecision in her sister's voice over the last proposition, and added emphasis to her own in consequence. "Of course, while his wife is away. After supper he could not require anything."

"And, of course, Angela will be back in a few days," said Iphigenia confidently. The continued estrangement of husband and wife was too terrible a thing to be dreamed of by either of them.

In spite of their complete and unusual agreement on the subject, the question of taking under their charge a man whose wife had temporarily abandoned him was far too serious a one to be settled summarily, and for some hours every side and bypath of it was discussed in awed tones, until at noon the thought of the poor Rector preparing his own lunch made tender sympathy crowd out every microscopic scruple of propriety (which the old maids saw through the microscope), and they set out together, carrying in turn a basket in which they had packed a cold fowl and other delicacies, in case Angela had been cruel enough to leave her lord and master without supplies.

Near the church they came in sight of Dr. Cairn walking briskly out of the lane, and curiosity to hear the latest news of Angela conquered their desire to show a haughty coldness to the man who had encouraged her in disobeying her husband's will. With one wavering accord they waited for the automatic figure to reach them.

"Morning, ladies," said the doctor, jerking off his hat, and too full of enthusiasm to notice the reserve which the little Tomtits were studying to display as a compromise with their consciences. "You will be glad to hear that our hero is going on splendidly. Wonderful constitution, and one that he has taken good care of. If it were not for the arm, there would be very little the matter with him to-day."

The old maids' faces showed no relief at the intelligence.

"Splendid nurse, your niece," he went on energetically. "I could not have picked on a better."

"I hope Mrs. Presyllett is quite well," said Prudence, anxious to discover how far Angela had made public her extraordinary prejudice against her husband. "When we met you last, she appeared to be, from mental suffering, in a state of excitement which made her scarcely seem responsible to us for her words. Did anything in her manner suggest to you that—well, we are becoming quite anxious about her."

"Oh! I do not think that you have the least need, Miss Gaydon. If anybody is responsible for her actions, and knows exactly what she is doing, I think it is your niece. You know, of course, that she is bringing an action at law to get her marriage with Presyllett annulled?"

The old maids gave a simultaneous cry.

"Her marriage annulled!" repeated Prudence.

"An action at law!" said Iphigenia.

The doctor's keen good-humoured eyes twinkled with enjoyment of their horror.

"It is a shocking affair, isn't it?"

"It is disgraceful. It is incredible!" cried Prudence, putting down the basket, to be ready with her smelling-salts if she found herself fainting.

"Shocking is not the word for it," chirped in Iphigenia, and the doctor nodded vigorously, with the twinkle still in his eye.

"Exactly what I think, ladies. In my opinion the Rector ought to be horse-whipped. The man who could seduce—yes, ladies, seduce a young and perfectly innocent girl into a marriage of this description by working upon her childish

religious fanaticism, may be a clergyman of the Church of England, but he is a rascal for all that, and I don't mind who hears me say it."

"I really don't understand what you can mean," said both ladies together, as the doctor paused for breath after his energetic denunciation of the man they admired.

"I am glad to hear it," said the doctor, starting off again as furiously as before. "I felt sure that you would never have allowed your niece to be drawn into such a ridiculous unnatural Romish piece of nonsense. I am very glad to hear that it is as much news to you as it was to me. I hold that your niece is doing a plucky thing in letting everybody know it, and bringing this suit. I should have advised the same thing exactly. It is just what men like Presyllett need, to be shown up in a law court, and I hope to goodness she will win her case. If there is any sense in the law of the land she will, and find herself free to marry a better man than the Rector, in a proper way. But I must not keep you standing in the cold, ladies. I will bid you good-morning."

And before the astonished Tomtits could draw in their breath to ask a single question, the automatic figure had jerked off its hat again and was steaming at full speed in the direction of the village.

Iphigenia was the first to recover herself.

"Goodness gracious, sister, what can he mean?"

"I am sure that I do not know," said Miss Prudence, her voice trembling with indignation, "but of this I am quite sure, that the dear Canon could not act dishonourably, and that he would not think of contracting with our niece any marriage that was not honourable and binding. That terrible girl must have been spreading some false and shocking libel against him; although I must say that I am surprised at a man of Dr. Cairn's sense believing a word from her, especially in the excited state in which we found her."

"Dr. Cairn has always been prejudiced against the Rector," said Iphigenia, "and that man Lyne influences everybody against him. It is very terrible to think of poor Angela being in such company. I hear that the Squire himself has become almost an atheist through knowing him, and



told Captain Benson that a talk with Lyne did him more good than one of the dear Canon's sermons."

"Well, nothing shall make me disbelieve in the Canon," said Prudence stoutly.

"Nor me," said Iphigenia, ashamed of the slight doubts of her Rector which had been forced into her mind by the doctor's energy. "But do you think that there is any chance of the marriage being annulled? That means that Angela and the Canon would not really be married, doesn't it?"

"Yes. What preposterous rubbish!"

"And we should not be any relation to him," pursued Iphigenia.

The little old maids looked at one another with startled bird-like eyes, and then, without a word, Prudence took up her basket, and they turned with one accord homewards.

"I wonder what falsehood Angela has really told," said Iphigenia thoughtfully as they walked; and Prudence tried to blush as she answered gravely—

"A terrible suspicion has occurred to me. I should never be happy again if I found that it was true, and that I had been the real cause of this terrible affair."

"You!" exclaimed her sister, with eyes rounder than ever.

"Yes, I," repeated Miss Gaydon solemnly. "It would be very terrible, but really, when we come to think of it all, it seems possible. You remember the confidence that I made to you just before this shocking estrangement took place. Well, I feel more persuaded than ever that I was right, and that Angela's marriage was the result of a mistake. If it were so, and if in an unfortunate moment the dear Canon admitted the fact, in a moment of irritation perhaps—for I am sure that Angela could irritate the very best of men—think what the consequence would be, remembering Angela's overwhelming pride. I can imagine her acting exactly as she has done. Don't you remember her saying, when she was so hysterical yesterday morning, that she was not really the Rector's wife? And then—I do not know whether you noticed it—but she appeared to have a sort of aversion to me. It was you that she spoke to most."

Iphigenia had indeed noticed it.

"And you think that she is trying to get the marriage annulled because of it?" said Iphigenia in awe-struck tones.

"I think nothing. I simply suggest it as a complete explanation of her mysterious conduct."

Iphigenia was bound to struggle against a theory which gave her sister a love-story more than herself.

"But it does not explain why Dr. Cairn spoke so strongly," she suggested argumentatively; and Prudence was ready with an answer.

"I do not expect that Angela would tell him the whole story. She would only say that Adrian"—she lingered over the name fondly—"had married her without caring for her."

Iphigenia was feeling convinced against her will, and was struggling to think of fresh refutation, when a happy idea occurred to her.

"Perhaps you are right, dear; if so, I hope that it will all come right, although I cannot see how it can unless Angela dies. The shock of losing the supposed love of a man like Adrian must be very great to her, and might affect her health. If anything like that does happen, I hope that you won't let the remembrance of Geoffrey Dale stand in your way, and prevent your caring for the poor Rector. I have never told you in all these years, but I really don't think that poor Geoffrey cared for you any more than for me."

She was alarmed by her boldness and cruelty when she saw the look of pain and sorrow that came into her sister's face. Geoffrey Dale was the old-time lover who had died the day before he proposed.

The next question which came to strain the little old maids' thinking powers was suggested by the tenderer-hearted Iphigenia.

"Don't you think that we ought to see Angela and use our influence with her to make her act more discreetly?" she asked suddenly over tea the same evening; and the debate thus started lasted long after the opportunity for action was past, and the question had become, not what they ought to do, but what they ought to have done.

On one side they were swayed by a curiosity to know what Angela's allegations against her husband really were—curiosity

which was tempered on Prudence's part by a fear that her theory might be demolished. On the other side was an injured sense of dignity which forbade them to show any interest in the girl who had chosen to accept the shelter of the Squire's home rather than sue for that of their own, which they would not have given her. Above all, an overpowering dread of associating themselves more than was absolutely necessary with the relative who seemed bound to taint them with the scandal which it was the business of their lives to avoid. The nominal object of the suggested visit, that of averting by their influence the scandal altogether, did not actually weigh with them at all, because each knew perfectly that her influence with her niece was nothing at all. And still they talked about it gravely for hours. It was the dread lest their visit to the Infidel's cottage might be construed into encouragement of their niece's actions which made the whole matter talk and prevented them acting.

"Perhaps," as Iphigenia said a hundred times, and each time as if the idea were a new and startling one—"perhaps the Canon might hear of it, and think that we were siding against him."

The fidelity with which they clung to their Rector, rather than to the niece with whom neither had felt any real sympathy, showed itself when at night a village lad brought them a letter from Angela, which Gabriel had inspired, and which had been penned at "The Barn." The gum was still wet, and the envelope opened without tearing. The note itself seemed a hurriedly written one. Angela informed them briefly that she was bringing an action at law to have the marriage with Canon Presyllett annulled; that in the meanwhile she thought it safer, in case Canon Presyllett should annoy her, to accept the kindly given hospitality of the Squire rather than that of her aunts, and regretted that the duty of nursing Mr. Lyne left her too little time to see them for the present.

"I am glad that Angela has some sense of what is due to us," said Iphigenia, as she read the hurried scrawl over her sister's shoulder. "We might call now and see really why she is acting like this."

Prudence turned upon her contemptuously.

“Call upon the woman who is determined to disgrace us, who talks about her husband annoying her, when that husband is such a man as our dear Rector, too! Iphigenia, I am surprised at you.”

“Then what shall you do?” asked Iphigenia timidly; and her sister put back the note in the envelope.

“I shall return this preposterous letter *unopened*, addressing it to the house where our niece—if we must still call her our niece—ought to be.”

“The Rectory? But she will not see it.”

“No,” said Prudence, with a gleam of satisfaction in her eye, “but the Rector will, and will understand what our feelings are in the case.”

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE few days which her aunts found so full of mental activity were to Angela the happiest that she had ever known.

Mrs. Gateacre had justified Gabriel's faith in her by receiving her into her home with more readiness than her husband had expected. The knowledge that the question of her marriage was to be submitted to the law was quite sufficient to make her take the revolted wife under her wing; and the fact that she was pleasing Gabriel by doing so filled her with enthusiasm for the office. With her openly avowed reverence for custom, she left the decision of the question at stake confidently to the judges who decide what custom commands in uncustomary cases. If the law said Angela was married, she was married; if the law said she was unmarried, she was unmarried; and while the law was deciding, she had a right to take the question as unsettled, and look upon Gabriel's protégée not as a runaway wife, but as a girl who was very *possibly* unmarried and independent. At the same time, she made no secret of the fact that, if the nullity suit failed, she could countenance nothing but the girl's return to her legal husband. Mr. Gateacre had not thought it prudent to tell her what Gabriel's plans were, in case the judges decided against him; and both he and his wife looked forward to the trial with much more excitement than the girl herself, whose fate would be so much affected by it.

Angela could not look upon the inevitable trial in a personal light at all. Gabriel had let her see that the result would not affect one iota the fact that they belonged to one another, and it was to Angela at best an unpleasant service which she was performing for the good of society, because Gabriel had told her that society needed it. Accustomed as she had been all

her life to ride rough-shod over popular ideas and prejudices at the dictates of conscience, making light of every custom, every usefulness which did not commend itself to her as dictated by her infallible creed, it was difficult for her to work up at once the enthusiasm which Gabriel felt for the worldly convenience and earthly happiness of his fellow-men ; and she chafed a little at the idea that they must delay their complete companionship, the companionship which would keep her always with him, out of deference to a worldly opinion, and an idea of expediency which she had always despised. Expediency and any opinion founded upon it had been to her always the voice of the world contending against the word of God ; and the ridicule, anger, or remonstrance she met with in refusing to listen to it, had furnished her with the materials for that martyrdom which was necessary to her to make her life in some way a counterpart of Christ's. The anger of Mrs. Gateacre when she had reasoned with her about her finery stood for the anger of the Pharisees when her Model upbraided them for their hypocrisy.

It necessarily took time, even after her mental acceptance of the fact, for her to *feel* that the natural distaste to the anger of others, like the natural distaste to burning one's fingers, was all part of the Divine leading of the Mind which created our natures and fire and anger. It was a creed which, with her logical mind, she was bound to accept when her very nature had made her accept as a Divine leading the perfect love she felt for Gabriel.

To deny the holiness of that love, that complete trust in him which had shown her vividly the egotism and unhealthiness of her past life, culminating in her deceptive alliance with the Canon, was as impossible to her as to deny the holiness of her love for Christ.

The holiness of her love made holy every expression of it. Certain as she was that the complete confidence between herself and Gabriel was a right thing, it was impossible for her to imagine that any result or expression of it should be wrong. That public opinion or the law should decide how far she should show her complete sympathy and love of Gabriel, allowing her to nurse him by day, but making

her leave him at night, and so on, appeared to her incongruous and coarse.

The respect which the ordinary girl feels for the ceremony of marriage had been killed in her utterly by her experience. If the ceremony had any of that purifying virtue which hundreds of girls must surely ascribe to it to justify themselves when they form a loveless union for wealth or position, it must needs make pure for Angela a union which she could not help feeling would be the most horrible and degrading which it was possible for her to imagine. As it was impossible for her to feel that her marriage with Presyllett could take the least tinge of holiness or rightness or cleanness from the fact that they had gone through the ceremony together, she was forced to see that the ceremony could not add any tinge of holiness to her lifelong companionship with Gabriel, or to the bearing of children for him, and the other vague duties that lifelong companionship would mean to her.

To live with a man she loved, and submit her will and judgment to his because she felt that he was wiser and better, more Christ-like than she was, was pure and pleasing to God. To live with a man she despised and hated, and submit herself to him because they had decided to call themselves man and wife, was impure and degrading.

The ceremony of marriage seemed to her only a Presyllett-like device of blasphemous casuistry, intended to blind the eyes of men and women to these two essential facts.

It was a dangerous view of marriage no doubt for a girl to hold, and made much depend upon the degree with which the man she loved deserved the confidence she gave him.

But it prevented her feeling a moment's uneasiness about the legal difficulty into which she had allowed herself to be drawn, and to the solution of which the Squire and his wife looked forward with such excitement.

Angela only awaited with a calm happy expectancy the time when Gabriel's half-understood scruples would be satisfied, and the glorious days she spent with him be no longer clouded by the pain of the nightly parting.

And even now the pain of parting was brightened by the thought of the morning's reunion. And each happy

reunion heralded a day more happy than any she had ever known.

In the old time she had told herself that she was very very happy. The sense of being holier than other people had been enjoyable. The feeling that she had a distinct mission, and was obeying it to the best of her ability, had filled her life, and made it more than worth living. And there had been very often moments of delicious emotion when she realised very vividly the reality and nearness of Christ, when she could see His smile and hear His Divine voice commending and encouraging her in her warfare for Him, when she could catch glimpses of the Paradise He had prepared for her reward, where she could be ever with Him.

But these sublime visions did not come in their perfection every day. She had found out, and hated herself for the impious knowledge, even before meeting Gabriel, that they owed a great deal to her state of health, even to the food she had eaten; that the mental effort which produced them exhausted her and caused them always to be followed by a reaction, which made the world more real than the promised Paradise, and the petty discomforts of it stronger than the smile of her Lord in affecting her spirits.

It was Gabriel who found for her the leading of the Creator even in the reaction, telling her that He has made other happiness for His creatures than that obtained by cultivating one department of the mind to the discredit of the other God-given departments; that holiness is wholeness, and the recipe for goodness the same as the recipe for happiness—to employ every force that the Creator has given us, physical, mental, and moral, in that balanced proportion which prevents the exercise of any one force being gained at the expense of another. He preached to her the strange gospel of earthly happiness, and Angela, in spite of its strangeness, was unprejudiced enough to see that it was the only gospel which can really exist with an actual belief in the Creator of everything as a God of Love.

The idea that man was placed on the earth to be happy there, rather than to deny himself every pleasure in order to be happy after he was dead, appealed to Angela the more because she



was experiencing more happiness than she had been able to imagine herself enjoying in heaven. It was not only that a perfect requited love made her daily companionship with Gabriel a dream of delight. All her emotions and thoughts had been unchained, and she was luxuriating in their freedom. She was like a child escaping from the beautiful but awe-inspiring and repressive half-lights of a cathedral to romp in the sunlit fields, running from flower to flower without restraint.

She took a girlish delight in making herself look her best for her lover's eyes, lamenting that she had no dress but the one austere one in which she had escaped from the Rectory, and delighting Mrs. Gateacre by commissioning her to buy the prettiest laces and trinkets she could for her in Barnwood. Mrs. Gateacre had quite fallen under the spell of this new natural woman, whom it was difficult for her to identify with the prim young saint who had lectured her on her Sunday finery. Angela herself laughed at the remembrance of the scene, and was full of pretty apologies for her priggishness. It seemed a dead self that she was apologising for, a hard-skinned chrysalis from whose husk she had emerged with the sensitiveness and life-joy of a butterfly.

She luxuriated in her new freedom of thought. She was keenly logical for a girl. It was her logic which had made her a fanatic in the old days, as the usual creed of Christendom must make every honest and logical person fanatical.

In the old days she had found her logic very much restricted. Her mind had to travel along a beaten road with the notice board, "Dangerous. This channel of thought leads to Hell," at the entrance of every bypath.

But now every thought was free. Gabriel had shown her that, by associating free-thought with ungodliness, Christianity had labelled itself atheistical. "Think freely, and you will find there is no God," it had said, and would not admit that if God is the Creator of everything, everything must teach us about Him.

The strangest thing about it all was that every word he spoke seemed to express a thought of her own, that she had thought without knowing it. All the ideas that had been

repressed as wrong were ready to rise and fill her mind the instant that the dead weight of her old creed was lifted, and she recognised every one of them in Gabriel's creed, no longer byways leading to hell, but all showing at their end the God who is everywhere.

Not that her religion became identical with Gabriel's. Religion as he understood it was identical with his character, a logical explanation of every motive and action, the tracing of it to his conception of the Creator. Religions like this must vary as characters vary, and similar as were the characters of Gabriel and Angela, there were of course a hundred points of difference between them.

Not that the differences mattered greatly to either of them. It is only when one belief is right and all the others necessarily wrong that discussion becomes embittered. And Angela had given up readily the idea that the Creator of everything has percolated through a hundred questionable channels one view of Himself and His pleasure, which must be accepted whether the honest and unselfish mind realises its truth or not. As a rule, when Gabriel differed from herself, as in his consideration for public opinion, she took it for granted that he knew better than she did, as he in his love and admiration of her took it for granted that many of her ideas of duty were truer and holier than his own. They both expected to learn from each other. On other points he recognised in her ideas those which he had held himself at an earlier stage of his own development, and he was content to wait for her honest thought to show her a wider, truer view. He was anxious that she should not struggle to hold any view that he did, simply because he held it.

"Many men who are probably wiser and better than I think differently from me, little woman," he would say; and, when he had failed to convince her by telling her what made him think what he did, would soothe away her momentary distress at the fact that they differed.

They talked a great deal together, for after the first day's illness Dr. Cairn had said that his invalid might talk as much as he liked if he did not excite or fatigue himself, and Angela's readiness to agree with him on almost every subject on which

they touched made their conversations only exhilarating to him. The presence of the woman he loved acted like a tonic, and made the rapidity of his recovery more and more astonishing to the good old doctor.

"It is of no use your trying to knock the belief in miracles out of our heads, Lyne," he said on the second day, "when your own life is a miracle. You frizzle yourself, suffocate yourself, tumble down with a three-storey house, bury yourself under the ruins, and here you sit chatting as brightly as if nothing had happened."

Gabriel laughed, but the look of worship in Angela's eyes increased. She was asking herself whether a man who lives very near God does not become endued with some special virtue which protects him against the evils of the world. In a way her question might have been answered in the affirmative. Gabriel's pursuit of holiness, which he identified with wholeness, had left him with a constitution ready to carry him through many experiences which would have proved fatal to Canon Presyllett, weakened as he was by fasting and undue emotionalism.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

ONE of the first uses Gabriel made of his returning strength was to revise the last chapter of his finished book, in order to keep faith with his publisher. He made his nurse feel very proud by asking her to read it through to him and write his corrections. To feel that she was doing something for him which he really needed was the perfection of happiness for her. It was the beginning of that life she looked forward to so joyously, when she would be a helpmate in all his labour.

The reading was a matter of some time, for there were many questions suggested by it to be asked and answered.

"Do you think that suicide can ever be right?" asked Angela, startled by one of his sentences; and Gabriel's face grew grave and thoughtful.

"I think that it would be cruel to say that it is always wrong. It is almost always wrong, because it is almost always the result of impatience or cowardice. Impatient of a passing cloud, a man sacrifices the life which a few days or years might have made happy and useful again. But the very fact that the power of self-destruction has been left in our hands inclines me to believe that it may sometimes be allowable, as the only refuge from hopeless pain, physical or mental. I am inclined to blame Romeo, but not Juliet, faced as she was by the life-long remembrance that her own artifice had led to her lover's death."

"I am afraid that I do not know the story very clearly," said Angela, flushing a little at the ignorance which a month before she was proud of. "I have not read any of Shakespeare's plays."

He neither showed nor felt surprise at her admission. He

was too well acquainted with every phase of the Christian creed to find novelty in any exhibition of its results.

"What a glorious time I shall have introducing you to the joys of life, darling," he said, after he had told her the old story, making her cry with its graphicness; "the joys that have been so long interdicted by your idea of religious duty."

The flush on her cheeks had changed to one of pleasure, and her beautiful eyes were full of gratitude and anticipation as she bent down to thank him with a kiss.

"But I shall read every word you have written before I want to look at another book, Gabriel," she said, with an enthusiasm which was for him the most delicious flattery.

He smiled remonstratingly.

"You will make me vain, little one."

Mrs. Marlow knocked at the door as he spoke. The devoted Squire had driven his lawyer over from Barnwood, and Mr. Capel was waiting to have a private interview with her in the study. Angela ran down at once.

The interview was a painful one for both of them, although the solicitor was a fatherly old man, who found it easy with the majority of his clients to touch unpleasant subjects with extreme delicacy. This girl's mixture of unconventional boldness with absolute ignorance bewildered him, and made his task a difficult one. The ignorance had to be dissipated when so much turned upon the non-consummation of the marriage, and Angela came away from the old gentleman's questioning with a great added horror of the ordeal through which she was passing. It required all her love and faith for Gabriel to prevent her feeling resentment against him for insisting that she should subject herself to it.

Mr. Capel had quoted a case which created considerable interest within the last few years, to support his opinion that the suit would certainly be successful if Angela's story could be substantiated. The difference between a simple and speedy settlement of the case and an expensive and wearisome lawsuit depended, he thought, upon whether Canon Presyllett was prepared to admit the conditions on which the marriage was entered, and the fact that it had been nothing more than a form.

Mr. Capel was sufficiently endued with the popular idea of the Canon's moral uprightness to feel little doubt of his admitting the truth, but Angela was ready to expect any falsehood from him.

"I do not see how the right and wrong of anything can be affected by anything that a man like that says," she argued with Gabriel, as they talked over the legal opinion. "We know the facts ourselves, and whether the man tells the truth or tells a lie, it cannot make the facts one bit different."

She was sitting in her favourite seat by the side of the invalid's bed, with her hand in his; and her voice was not that of protest. It was rather the inquiry of a puzzled child wishing to learn.

"It is like this, darling," said Gabriel, trying to make her duty plain; "if we people in the world are to be anything like friends and brothers instead of each fighting for his own hand, we must back one another up; and it is everybody's business to see that I don't steal Presyllett's real wife."

"But we know that I am not his real wife, dearest," said Angela.

"Just so, but the people who ought to back him up don't know. If he admits it, well and good. If he does not—well, they have just as much reason to believe him as to believe us, and the truth will have to be thrashed out before they know whether they ought to help him or not."

"And suppose they think that they ought to help him?"

"Well, they will do their best, and it is right that they should. Luckily they cannot prevent me taking you away, but they can make it uncomfortable for us, and show that they don't approve of us. You would not like everybody around us to be thinking us impure."

"But I do not care a bit what people think," said Angela resolutely, "so long as they cannot part us and we know that they are wrong."

"You are a brave little woman," he said, raising her hand to his lips tenderly, "and I think that I could manage so that the world's disapproval did not annoy us much. But that is only because we are completely content with each other, and can afford to go where we like. People who were forced by

the need of their work to stay among their old associates would find it harder than you can imagine, little woman; and the best test of right and wrong is to ask ourselves whether we could under any circumstances do the thing we meditate. Only by doing that can we make our opinions of any use to other people; and of course you want other people to be happy and do the wisest thing always, as well as ourselves, don't you, sweetheart?"

It was an appeal to the desire she had always felt to be an example to those around her, put in a new form which dissociated it from its old egotism, and Angela could not but feel its force; and still—she was very anxious to hear from Mr. Capel that the ordeal of a long trial would be avoided by the Canon's admission of the truth.

She could not understand the certainty which Gabriel seemed to feel that the Rector would tell the truth, and depend for the recognition of the marriage solely upon the binding and insoluble nature of the marriage service, however undertaken. She looked upon the Rector now simply as a hypocrite without a conscience; but Gabriel was far too sympathetic and scientific an analyst of human motive to share her view. For the man's unclean passion to burst through the artificial restraints of his creed, when he was strongly tempted, was one thing. To deliberately tell an abominable lie, which would in all probability be detected as a lie, was a different one; and the one sin which made Angela expect any crime from him did not make the Infidel expect the other. Pure wilful hypocrisy he had found, in his keen examination of men, to be a very rare vice indeed. He knew well enough that men will ever twist the hundred different phases of Christianity to suit their characters, to justify or ignore their pet vices and exalt their pet virtues; but the human mind is a very secret manufactory, and keeps its processes hidden very effectually from the ego who is fondly supposed by Christian ethics to control its actions and be responsible for its manufactured articles in the way of action. Disowning as he did any idea of a creative spontaneous will in man which would make a scientific forecast of his actions impossible, the Infidel owed his success as a novelist to the

power he had of judging truly from a man's character, and the influences brought to bear on it, what his action in a given case would be; and he would probably have forecasted correctly what course the Reverend Canon Presyllett would take if he had been more intimately acquainted than he was with the ecclesiastic's character. Gabriel did not know him well enough to appreciate at its full value that all-absorbing passion for his own dignity which made him shrink from the slightest breath of scandal, which had made him hide himself in his big deserted house with blinds drawn, afraid of seeing a single face that might bear on it an expression of commiseration or contempt. Contempt for himself was indissolubly connected in his mind with contempt for the religion which he officially represented, and the preservation of his dignity became in consequence a religious duty of the highest importance, to attain which any step became allowable. Falsehood and impurity were transformed into virtues if they were necessary to prevent the faith in and worship of God from being dragged into disrepute.

It was not only the respect for God as represented by the respect for His minister which was in danger. The most holy and binding ordinance of marriage was being made light of, and its bindingness must be maintained at all cost. When a letter from Angela's lawyer, formally asking for the name of his solicitor in view of the impending suit, told him that the bindingness of the marriage was to be tried by law, the fact gave him no relief. The idea of any civil power judging an ordinance of God was above all things abhorrent to him. The law was often a useful assistant to religion, helping him, for instance, in his spiritual labours by punishing for him the village barber who ignored his teaching sufficiently to open his shop on Sunday; but for the law to overrule the marriage service, and declare unmarried a couple whom the minister of God had declared married, was not to be thought of. And unless the marriage were made a real one, the Canon realised that the chance of the law annulling it was very great indeed. Comparative impurity became idealised into a virtue, a requirement of holiness, when it seemed necessary to prevent such a desecration of the services of the church.



With the imminent fear before him that the respect of the parish for his religion, and for the marriage ceremony, would be weakened in consequence of his own actions, the Canon fell on his knees in a spirit of contrition, and begged forgiveness for the restraint which his spiritual pride had made him place upon his passions, to the detriment of his Master's service.

He spent much time in prayer in the silent house, eating very little, since it was necessary for him to prepare his own food, and priding himself on the contempt of earthly appetite which he showed out of dislike to a menial occupation. He clung to a cloudless union with his Master, now that he felt ostracised from the society and respect of his fellow-men. The union was made more possible than it had ever been, by the transformation of his unclean lust into a virtue required from him for the Divine service. There was nothing to prevent him yielding up his will utterly to the will of God.

The agreement between the Angel and the Beast gave him a sense of spiritual peace. He felt all Angel.

If Gabriel had known what was in his heart, he would have thought him all Beast, and feared him more than he did. If he could have seen him pacing the silent house, like a caged animal, all the long day, his mind full of one absorbing purpose; if he could have seen him in the dim study on his knees, wrestling in prayer for Divine assistance in the most unholy of enterprises, or creeping out after nightfall to walk up and down the Hartle lane until the Squire's brougham passed and from the deep shadow of the hedge he could catch a glimpse sometimes of his wife's face, the Infidel might have been less generous in his estimate of the man of God, and less surprised when the blow came and the Rector of Windlehurst prepared to meet the suit by denying *in toto* every allegation that his wife made with regard to their marriage.

Mr. Capel, warned by the painfulness of his former interview with his client, communicated this disturbing piece of information to Angela by letter, leaving it to Mrs. Gateacre, to whose house the letter was addressed, to make plain to her

the nature of the evidence which would be almost absolutely required to combat the Canon's denial.

The Squire's wife, recalling the feelings of her own girlhood, spoke to her very gently and kindly, when they were together, after the letter had been read.

"But you really need not feel afraid of a nice old man like Dr. Cairn," she said persuasively; but Angela did not answer a word. With wild eyes and white cheeks she stood silent as a statue.

"Could Gabriel require this of her?" she was asking herself, and telling herself again and again that it was impossible.

## CHAPTER XL

"MISS ANGELA is a little late this morning, isn't she, sir? She is generally so punctual," said Mrs. Marlow, glancing at the watch on the dressing-table.

"I am fast," said Gabriel. "I want to be quite dressed by the time she comes in. It will please her to find me looking like a man again."

It was the first day that Dr. Cairn's mandate allowed him to leave his bed, and the old housekeeper was helping him into his clothes.

"And how do you feel, sir, now that you are on your feet?" asked the old lady solicitously, as she watched him cross the floor to the dressing-table.

"A little queer, of course, after being on my back for a week, but more myself than I expected. By the time I have had breakfast I expect that I shall be wanting to go out for a walk. Hello! I did not know I was such a beauty!"

He had caught sight for the first time since the fire of the reflection of his face in the glass.

"Dr. Cairn says that the scars will almost disappear in time, sir, perhaps altogether," said the housekeeper reassuringly; and Gabriel shrugged his shoulders.

"I should hope so. Do you know, I want to be just as good-looking as a man can be. What anybody can see in a face like this——"

He ended the sentence abruptly, to turn with outstretched hand and eyes radiant with welcome; for Angela's gentle knock had sounded on the door, and Mrs. Marlow was passing her in good-natured haste to leave them together.

"I have been looking at myself in the glass and wondering

how you can care for such a wreck, little woman," he said, clasping her hand in his, and kissing her upturned face.

Its pallor and the strained feverish expression of her eyes struck him before he had finished the sentence.

"What is it?" he asked abruptly, holding her at arm's length, and trying to read through her eyes what it was that troubled her.

She had come from her talk with Mrs. Gateacre so full of the appeal she had to make to him, that she was just realising that he was dressed, and shame of her concentration overcame her. Her eyes filled with tears.

"How selfish I am," she said, her mouth trembling, "not to let you see that I am glad. I am so glad, really, dearest; but——"

Her self-restraint left her altogether, and, drawn by his hand, she laid her head on his breast to sob there.

For a few moments he only stroked her hair soothingly with his uninjured hand. The other, swathed in bandages, still hung at his side. The sight of it reminded her of his illness, and made her command herself.

"I am letting you stand, and you are so ill," she said, drawing him to a chair. "Sit down, dearest, and let me tell you how glad I am to see you getting well so quickly, and how I love your poor scarred face."

She dropped on her knees by his side as he sat down obediently, and tried to smile up into his sympathetic eyes through her undried tears.

Gabriel smiled back.

"We will talk about that afterwards, darling. Now tell me what has happened." His hand was tenderly stroking again the waves of her rebellious hair, and he waited patiently when she did not answer. Her head was bowed as she knelt at his knee, and he felt that she was crying again. Her slender hands clasped and unclasped painfully.

"I do not want to go on with the law case," she said abruptly, in a constrained voice.

"But you were so brave, dearest. You said that you would do it for me."

"Yes, yes, but you did not know or you could not have asked me. I cannot, really I cannot."

Gabriel drew in his breath, his brows contracting.

"Has that man been trying to frighten you out of 'it by telling a lie?" he said, his voice almost harsh.

"He denies everything."

"The hound! Then you were right and I was wrong, darling. Well, we must not let him succeed."

Angela did not answer. She had caught the sound of Mrs. Marlow's footsteps crossing the outer room, and rose from her knees to open the door, as the housekeeper came in with Gabriel's breakfast.

She placed the tray on a little Indian table by the fire, and stood smoothing her creaseless apron.

"I should like to go to Barnwood to-day, if you can spare me, Miss Angela. There are a good many things that we are wanting."

Angela, shy of being appealed to as if she were mistress of the house, turned to Gabriel, who answered for her.

"Dr. Cairn said that he would not call again till to-morrow," added Angela, "and nobody else is likely to come, so you might as well lock the front door before you go. I never hear anybody knock here. If you go out the back way, you can lock the gate after you."

Her danger at the Rectory had still left her with a fear of the Canon, which the further revelation of his perfect baseness served to increase, and even with Gabriel she felt safer to think that the house would be locked against him while the housekeeper was not at hand to lend her share of protection.

Gabriel was impatient for the old lady to leave the room.

"How did you hear what Presyllett says?" he asked, when he and Angela were alone together again.

"I will tell you about it after you have breakfasted, dear."

She was pouring out his coffee, and drew a chair for him to the table.

"What a little despot you are," he said, affecting a cheerfulness which he was far from feeling; and he sat down obediently to the meal, Angela standing at his side to wait upon him, and perform every little service that the uselessness of his right hand made necessary.

She did it all quite silently this morning, for her mind was

too full of the talk that was to come for her to make even the pretence of speaking about anything else.

She had not opened her lips when Mrs. Marlow came in, dressed for her expedition, to clear away the tray before she started; and Angela, nervous still about leaving the lower part of the house unguarded, followed her downstairs to make sure that the entrances were left locked. She did not return to the sick-room until the housekeeper was gone. Then she mounted the stairs slowly, thinking of the task that lay before her, and found Gabriel trying unsuccessfully to roll himself a cigarette with his one hand.

"You see, I cannot get on for a moment without your help, sweetheart," he said smiling, as he pushed away half-a-dozen torn papers. "But it does not matter now. I do not want to smoke while you are with me. It is delicious to think that we shall have a whole morning quite alone together. Has Mrs. Marlow gone?"

"Yes, dear."

"And now we can talk. How did you hear of that villain's decision—through the lawyer?"

Angela had seated herself at the table, to roll deftly into its paper the tobacco he had been wanting. It was an accomplishment in which she was already becoming expert under Gabriel's tuition. She stopped to take the lawyer's letter from the bosom of her dress, and handed it to him in silence, going on with her task while he read it through. Her heart was beating very rapidly; it seemed to her as though her breath was held back, waiting for his words to give it freedom again; but her fingers did not pause in their task, and a little heap of cigarettes rose under them. As the twelfth was rolled, she rose, without glancing at him, to get the scissors from the mantelshelf by which he was standing with the sheet in his hand, and began to cut off the untidy ends mechanically.

Would he not speak and say that the whole horrible business was unnecessary, and that she could belong to him at once, whatever the world chose to think, so that she could breathe again?

The clipping sound of the scissors sounded audibly in the silence, and the rustle of the letter when he moved it made

her start, thinking that he was going to speak at last. How could he hesitate? It was cruel, unsympathetic of him.

She moved her head away irritably, when at last he stirred and came to lay his hand on her hair. The gentle tenderness of the action made her angry.

Why should he appear sorry for her? Why could he not say that the trial was not to be thought of, that she was dearer to him than his scruples about a mere worldly opinion?

He did not seem to her to have noticed her action; although, if she had dared to let her eyes reach his face, she would have seen that it had grown more white and strained than even the reading of the letter had made it.

"It is very bad news," he said gently, "horrible news. I am so sorry, darling."

Her impulsive anger leaped out at his pity. He could understand and pity her, and still think of making her suffer. Could he love her at all? Could any man love as a woman did, or were they all bound to hug their cold self-righteousness, and look upon the woman who gave up everything to them as mere outside influences, helping or retarding them in their desire to look well with their fellows?

She stood up and confronted him now, but her eyes flashed too hotly to see the marks of suffering on his face.

"Why should you be sorry for me?" she said passionately. "There is nothing for you to be sorry for unless you choose. Why do you not say that the trial is useless and impossible? How can you really care for me, if you make me go through its horror and nastiness, just to make you feel that you are doing some sort of good to people to whom it cannot possibly matter?"

Her words flashed out quick and impetuous, and when he moved she put up her hand as if to prevent him touching her. But Gabriel made no attempt to do so. He walked back slowly to his place by the fire, and when he spoke his calm measured voice contrasted strangely with her passionate one.

"Do you really doubt that I love you, Angela?" he said slowly; and his quietness only increased her anger. He was torturing her in cold blood. She was beating the wings of

her heart against a cold mental theory which kept his feeling, his humanity ice-bound.

"Oh yes, you love me well enough," she said, with less restraint than ever; and her half-hysterical laugh stabbed him cruelly. "But not as I love you. I could not make you suffer to convict all the liars in the world. But so long as you feel good and noble, you do not care how I am to be disgraced and insulted."

She had burst into hysterical tears, but when he would have drawn her to him to soothe her with a caress, she tore herself away passionately, to fling herself down by the table and sob unrestrainedly, with her face buried in her hands.

Gabriel did not follow her; the keenness with which he realised how much she must be suffering to speak as she had done made him feel sick and faint; the tendency that the contents of the room seemed to have to swim round him warned him to sit down on the edge of the bed, from which he had risen, for the first time since the fire, less than an hour before.

The hollowness of his voice when he spoke reminded her again of his illness.

"You are hard on me, little woman," he said huskily; and as Angela turned she saw that his face was deathly white, and his eyes full of tears.

She was full of contrition in a moment. Woman-like, the sight of his emotion spoke to her more than all the carefully reasoned argument in the world, and she hastened to his side, to throw her arms round his neck and kiss away the tears that had melted her.

"I am horrible. How can you care for me when I am so selfish and unjust? Oh, my love, my love, I know that you love me more than yourself. I never doubted it for a moment, but you really don't know how impossible it is for me to do what you want. The disgraceful questioning and publicity of it all would kill me. I am foolish. You thought I was braver, but you will not ask it now. It cannot matter very much. I am all yours. You know, dear love, that I belong to you entirely, altogether body and soul, and nothing can alter that. Why should we think of anything else? I



am your wife, to do what you will with, because I love you and know you love me. Nothing can make my love or yours any truer. Why should we think another thought about my foolishness in the past, and that horrible service I went through? Every reminder of it tortures me. Why cannot we forget it? Why cannot I be yours entirely now, from this moment?"

Her arms, warm and soft through the thin nurse's dress she wore, clung round his neck tightly. Her big eyes, lustrous with tears, gazed up to his, tender with love and appeal.

Gabriel was very human. The momentary faintness had gone, and left him keenly alive. The sensuous languor of convalescence only gave his nerves an added sensitiveness to the touch of the beautiful womanly form pressed to his. He could not help remembering that they were alone together in the house, behind locked doors.

But the physical part of his temptation, hard as it was, was powerless against the lifelong habit of self-restraint which he had practised. The real keenness of the temptation to give that seal to their love which would satisfy her of the abandonment of all his scruples with regard to public opinion, lay in the fact that by withholding it he was leaving her to the torture of the trial. It was a more terrible temptation than had ever opposed his morality before. To give himself pain, discomfort, annoyance, in pursuit of rightness, was easy enough; but to give pain to the woman he loved more than himself, to make her doubt his love, to appear almost as if he were making himself out better than she, when he knew that she was divinely unselfish, divinely pure—it was terrible to him.

There was a dread upon him lest she should misjudge his hesitation, lest she should credit him with the common idea of purity which makes an act unclean in itself, and needing the sanctification of five minutes' priestly gibberish to cleanse it; if she credited that idea, she would be thinking that he doubted her purity, that he criticised her. And his sensitive realisation of what she would feel if she did so, made the fear a torture.

Why should he force her to undergo the trial? Their union, as she said, could not be made a whit purer by their

troubling themselves to satisfy society that it was pure. They could go abroad at once, and their wealth—for Angela had money of her own too, unless Presyllett had managed to secure it by a settlement—would make them independent of public opinion. He would shield her so that the breath of scandal never came near her. Presyllett would no doubt bring an action for divorce, but there was no need to defend it. He was welcome to the damages, however great, that a sympathetic jury of Christians might award him.

The thoughts flashed through his mind at lightning speed. His hesitation showed itself in his face, and made Angela hopeful of success.

“If there is anything wrong, and I am sure there cannot be,” she urged, “I will bear the responsibility. It is I who ask that the law case should be abandoned. Agree for my sake, because I have asked, Gabriel, not because it is right or wrong.”

Her words brought the real issue back to him, and he bent down and kissed her.

“It is not a case of right and wrong, Angela,” he said gently; and the pain in his voice, the signs of suffering in his face, made her patient, although she knew from his gentleness that his decision was unchanged. An admiration of his resolution was conquering her rebellion and resentment as soon as she realised it. “It is simply a question of what is the wisest thing to do. I have no code of right actions which I must perform or enforce. My only aim is to secure you the greatest amount of happiness; for you must know, darling, that your happiness is my happiness, that I would a hundred times rather inflict a pain on myself than on you.”

“But if it is only my own happiness that is at stake,” said Angela wonderingly; for his argument, now that his voice trembled with passion and sympathy, appealed to and calmed her; “if it is only my own happiness, surely I can decide.”

“It is my happiness as well, but we cannot disconnect the two, and you shall decide if you like when I have shown you what your decision means, and why I wish you to go on with the nullity suit.”

"You know that I dare not decide differently from you," she said, trying to smile through her tears; "you are so much better than I."

"No, I am not," he said quickly, smiling in turn; "but I know more than you do, little woman. You can see only the unhappiness of the present, the horror of the suit and all it entails. I know better than you do the unhappiness of the future from which it will save you. The difference between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, is only the difference between what appears to be wise if we take a big view and if we take a little view; and I am trying to take a big view and look at the happiness of our whole lives. You think, little woman, that the disapproval of the world won't hurt you half so much as this horrid publicity will, but that is because your mind, if not your body, has been living in a convent. You thought it was right to wrap yourself up in a hard creed and not care what the ordinary world did or said about you. If you had gone on like that, you would have got harder and harder, and less and less human, till you became quite unlovable; but you are going to live in the outside world with me, and if you feel new pleasures from living contact with people, you will also feel new pains, the pain of forfeited friendships and horrible misconceptions. In our new life we shall form friendships which are very dear to us, but unless you go through with the trial, we shall not form one without feeling that it may be lost at any moment. The news of the past will spread everywhere, and the woman who is like a sister to you one day will hear the next that you are a divorced woman, and shun you. She will not stop to inquire whether the label you have gained was deserved or not. We cannot expect her to, when you have had the chance of defending yourself and let it go. Nor can we blame her for shunning us, when she has heard only that man's story of your marriage."

"But I should not mind telling everybody our story, without leaving them to hear other accounts of it."

"If that were possible, it would mean that you must keep the story alive and with you all your life. The trial once over, we could forget it. Then, little woman, you must remember that you are no longer a complete person; you are only half of

one, and I am the other half. However brave you are, and however proof you feel against popular opinion, you will find that you are not proof against popular disapproval of *me*, any more than I can be proof against popular disapproval of you. I can bear a good deal of scandal against myself cheerfully, but a word against you, even if it were as false as it could be, would hurt me horribly. I know that I should be all my life trying to hide you, for fear of finding you with people who had a wrong opinion of you, and all my life I should be afraid. Wouldn't you do a great deal to save me from that, darling?"

She nodded silently, afraid to trust her voice.

"And then, girly, if we take a wider view still," he went on, yet more gently and tenderly, "and think of our children, it seems plainer and plainer that your right course is to go through with the suit whatever it costs. Upon them, as upon us, society would vent its disapproval, and we could not expect them to bear the disapproval cheerfully and bravely simply because they know society has made a mistake. You cannot wish them to keep alive the wretched story of that man and his untruth to exculpate themselves. It is pleasanter to think of putting the world right about us before they come into the world, isn't it, little one?"

Angela nodded again silently.

His words had convinced her, but still the horror of it!

With his wonderful sympathy, he knew her thought, and nerved himself to speak of it.

"With regard to the suggestion in Mr. Capel's letter, dear," he said, in a more matter-of-fact tone, which covered his effort, "it seems the only way in which we can be sure of succeeding, and it would save a good deal of unpleasant evidence of another kind. You would save the servants from being dragged into the case. I know that it is very terrible to you. Although I am a man, and do not feel as you do, still I think I know *how* horrible the very suggestion is to you. But it is one of those things which have all their pain in the present, which a wide view decreases instead of increasing. Look at it in a year's time, a month's. What pain will it have left?"

She had buried her face on his breast, and did not answer. He did not expect her to. But after a long pause he asked, in his matter-of-fact voice—

“You will see Dr. Cairn to-morrow when he calls? I will explain it all to him.”

She nodded assent without raising her face, and they sat in silence again for a long time, his hand caressing again the red-gold that he loved so tenderly.

When she raised her head at last, she saw that there were tears in his eyes, and she kissed them away impulsively, blaming herself for having caused them by selfishly exaggerating her own hardship.

“I shall never never rebel again,” she said passionately, “against anything you direct. When I cannot see why you direct it, I shall be quite sure that you know better than I.”

“You must not think me infallible, little one,” he said; “that is not good for anybody. But you must never doubt my love for you, or think that I am differing from you because I care less for your happiness than my own. That is where faith comes in.”

“I do not know how you can care for me when I was so wicked and horrible,” she said, full of repentance still; and Gabriel only answered with a kiss.

“And now, dearest,” he said cheerfully, “now that we have quite settled about what we are to do, let us forget the whole unpleasant business for to-day, and talk about what we shall do when the wretched trial is over, and we can give society the pledge it demands—that we really mean to belong to one another till the end of our days. What a lucky thing that fire was. If it had not happened, I should have been crossing the Atlantic to-day, the most miserable man in the world. I do not think that we will go to America now, though. You will like Italy better, and we shall be more alone there.”

He ran on, drawing vivid word-pictures of the beauty of a little place near Naples where he had stayed once to write one of his novels, and where he would take her for their honeymoon; and Angela's heart thrilled at the delicious prospect of their happiness.

But the very perfection of the prospect frightened her.

"It makes me almost afraid to feel so happy," she said, twining her arm in his.

Canon Presyllett, who had grown more desperate than ever after voluntarily making his whole reputation hang on the avoidance of the lawsuit, was trying the locked door of the cottage as she spoke.

## CHAPTER XLI

ANGELA tried bravely to keep back her tears when the dreaded time of parting came for her that night. Day by day it had become harder to her to say good-bye, for every day had increased the happiness of companionship with the man she loved, and made more keen the contrasting absence. And to-day her happiness had been more complete than it had ever been. Not till Gabriel's words had removed her resentment for ever did she realise how great the resentment had been, and what a cloud had hung between them on account of his persistence in a step she had thought in her heart of hearts useless and conventional. Now she understood the wisdom of his resolve, and there was nothing to cloud, however slightly, the completeness of their confidence and of her trust in him. The day that had opened for her with such pain had brightened into the most perfect of her existence. How could she help crying a little that the end of it had come? And still she did not want Gabriel to see her tears. For to-night she realised, as she had never done before, that the pain was as great for him as for her. Deep in her heart before had been the rebellious thought that he was supported by a feeling that he was doing something very holy, the feeling that she had known so well in the old days; but now she saw that he was suffering, as keenly as herself, a present pain only for the sake of her own future happiness, and her heart filled with reverence and worship of him.

"Good-night, good-night, my darling, my own," she said, as she clung to him in their last embrace. "Get quite well very quickly, for my sake, dear one. Good-night."

He pressed her to him passionately.

"Good-night, darling. It is hard to lose you for twelve

hours, but it is only twelve hours, and the morning will soon be here. Good-night!"

Their lips met in another long passionate kiss, and she tore herself away, only to turn at the door to cling to his neck and kiss him again. Parting was very very hard, and when she ran down the stairs at last, her eyes were streaming with the tears she need no longer conceal. She had bid Mrs. Marlow good-night when the old lady came upstairs to say that the brougham had come for her, so that Gabriel's kiss might be the last thing to remember as she left the cottage. She ran down straight now to the open hall door, before which the Squire's carriage stood, scarcely distinguishable in the darkness of the lane. Its dimness vaguely suggested itself to her mind, but she did not think about it sufficiently to notice that the carriage lamps were not lighted as usual, and she shut herself into the brougham, with a little relief that the Squire was not there to notice her tears. He had told her that he might not be home in time, from a day's visit he was making to town, to act as her escort as he usually did.

Angela, whose sympathies had widened wonderfully under Gabriel's influence, was growing fond of the bluff, kind-hearted man, whom she had judged severely in the old days, and never forgot that he was her lover's staunchest admirer in Windlehurst, and that he had been the first to tell her the glorious news that Gabriel loved her, the news that seemed to have changed her whole life.

But to-night she was glad that she could be alone during the drive, to let her mind dwell uninterruptedly a little longer on the things that Gabriel had said to her, on the revelation that she had enjoyed of his masterly wisdom and goodness.

How wonderful that such a man, the noblest and grandest in the world, should care for her, she a foolish child who had to be taught everything that was right, she who had been so self-righteous and inhuman. How good and clever it had been of him to see in spite of her foolish fanaticism that she really had a human heart, and a mind to recognise a higher truth than any she had yet been taught.

The happiness of belonging always to such a man! What a life of joy they would lead together, he always helping her



to choose the path, however difficult, that led to real happiness, and not to an illusive one. Her mind carried her away into dreamland as she recalled the pictures he had drawn of their life in Italy, a life that was to be no less useful to others than enjoyable to themselves, and she did not notice that the brougham, in spite of its unlighted lamps, was being driven more rapidly than usual along the dark and narrow lane.

It is strange how consciousness often appears to be affected without the mediumship of the senses. Without having once looked out of the carriage window, or questioned which direction the brougham was taking, Angela roused herself suddenly from her dreams, aware that the driver had turned at the end of the Hartle lane in the wrong direction, which led to Barnwood and away from the Hall. She pulled down the window quickly, and saw that they had already rounded the church. What could the man be thinking of? She put her head out of the window and called to him, with no thought yet except that he had either made a mistake or had been told to drive along the Barnwood Road to pick up the Squire returning from his journey, and had stupidly omitted to tell her what his orders were.

The man did not answer. They were close to the Rectory gate now, which for the first time in her knowledge had been left wide open, and her surmises turned to panic as the brougham wheeled round with dangerous speed to enter the path that led to the house she dreaded. It was only by a chance that the gate-post did not strike her as she stretched herself out of the window calling to the driver, who seemed deaf. Just at the turn, a sense of slight relief came to her with the sight of her aunts, who were returning from a friend's at Barnwood, and who had stopped at the gate to let the carriage pass. She called out to them in a tone of terrified appeal, and as the certainty came over her that she was the victim of some horrible plot on Canon Presyllett's part, and an impulse seized her to open the door and jump from the carriage at all costs, in spite of the rapid rate at which it was travelling, the knowledge that Iphigenia had certainly heard her restrained her. Whatever the plot, she could surely defend herself from any violence until her aunts came, as

they must do, to her rescue, and saved her from the plot, if not by physical force, at least by emphasising the danger of that scandal which she knew the Canon was so anxious to avoid.

She looked back to make sure that they were pursuing, but the gateway was already lost in the darkness, and no figure had emerged from the obscurity.

At the sound of her niece's terrified voice Iphigenia had hurried a few steps after the brougham, till Prudence overtook her, laying her hand in indignant roughness on her arm.

"Iphigenia, what are you going to do? We have no right to interfere between Canon Presyllett and his wife."

"But she is being driven there against her will," cried Iphigenia with excited sympathy; and Prudence held her back by main force.

"And why should she not be, pray? If she has so far forgotten all that is due to her husband, to the sacred vow she has taken, and to the reputation of her relatives, as to give herself up to an atheist and leave her husband, I am sure that it is very kind and forgiving of the dear Canon to try and save her by main force. We cannot interfere with him; we can only hope that he may be successful in putting an end to a scandal that otherwise will certainly drive us from our home. Did you see who the driver was?"

"I had only time to see poor Angela's face," said Iphigenia, unconvinced. "Don't you think really, Prue, that we ought to go to the house and see that it is all right?"

"And decide whether a man has a right to his own wife?" asked Prudence ironically. "Fidge Gaydon, I am surprised at you. I suppose that you want the Canon to get a divorce in order that he may marry you, but I can assure you that you would not be the second Mrs. Presyllett."

Iphigenia answered hotly, almost forgetting Angela's cry in her indignation at such an insult; and the two little old maids stood and wrangled at the gate until Prudence conquered as usual, and Iphigenia allowed herself to be dragged unwillingly home, with a despairing cry ringing in her ears, and making her deaf to the homilies on marriage and its sacredness with which her sister was trying to satisfy herself that she had done

right in allowing her devotion to the Canon and to the marriage service to rule her actions.

Half-way home they saw the brisk figure of Dr. Cairn approaching, and Iphigenia, distracted between fear of offending convention as personified at present by her sister, and a womanly desire to help Angela in her appealing distress, was seized by a sudden impulse. Why should she not tell the kindly doctor what had happened, and leave to him the responsibility of deciding what ought to be done? It was not often that she acted on impulse, and the idea that she might do something which would disgrace her for ever in Prudence's eyes frightened her. If he stopped and spoke to them, she thought she might tell him. There could be no harm surely in just mentioning in conversation what they had seen. It was not like taking any part in the affair herself. Yes, if he stopped to speak, as he usually did, she would tell him.

Dr. Cairn happened to be in a hurry, however. The cobbler had been seized with an idea that he had taken a turn for the worse, and had sent for him post-haste; and the doctor passed the two little figures with quick strides and the most automatic of salutes.

Iphigenia's heart sank. She had counted upon him stopping. The cry of Angela rang in her ears again quite vividly, and with a sudden decision, more impulsive than before, she turned and ran after him, to pour out her story into his startled ears. She was half-way through it before her sister realised what she was doing, and before Prudence could reach them to remonstrate, the doctor had startled even Iphigenia by breaking into a run in the direction from which they had come. His last quick words were in poor Iphigenia's ears still—

“And you did nothing? Good God! can't an old maid ever be a woman?”

“Fidge, what have you done?” said Prudence, breathless with surprise and indignation.

“I have told him,” said Iphigenia, bursting into sobs. “I know it was wrong of me, but I could not help it. I could not, really. That cry of poor wicked Angela's haunts me.”

Meanwhile poor Angela had expected their help at every moment, and she was far from feeling hopeless, although her

terror was very great. She had determined that the moment the brougham slackened speed sufficiently, she would leap out and hurry to meet them. The carriage door was already open, and she stood on the step ready for the leap; but as she felt the distance decreasing between herself and her protectors, fear conquered every other emotion, and she threw herself out before the speed of the horses had perceptibly slackened. The momentum threw her at full length on the gravel, scarring her hands cruelly, and rendering her for a moment dazed with the shock.

She found herself trying to think where she was, and what had happened, and then as the remembrance of her danger came back she rose to her knees hurriedly. But before she could regain her feet, the driver, who had leaped down from his seat, was upon her holding her down.

She had counted as a last resource on arguing with the man, and offering him a greater bribe than the Canon must have done to take her part. She would give him a thousand pounds, if necessary, to let her get away from this terrible house.

Now, as his bony hands closed on her shoulders, she turned faint and sick with the realisation that it was Presyllett himself. The overpowering fact gave her the strength of despair. She must not faint or lose possession of herself. She must use every atom of her strength to resist him until her aunts came. Why were they so long? Surely they had heard her, and understood that she was in danger. The idea that they could have understood and still left her to her fate never occurred to her. It was only for a little while that she must struggle. She tried to cry, but something closed over her mouth and choked back the sound. With the acuteness with which at such moments all the senses are on the alert, she realised that the gag was one of the large cambric handkerchiefs that the Canon always used. It smelt strongly of a strange sickly perfume that made her faint and dizzy. And still she never guessed the truth, or tried to tear away the cloth saturated with an anæsthetic that was stealing her senses. She was glad that the man seemed to have no thought except to prevent her crying out. Why should she wish to cry? Her aunts would come directly now, and meanwhile she was husbanding her

strength to resist him when he ceased to think of gagging her. But how faint the thought of it made her feel. Could it be possible—a horrible fear came over her—that she was going to lose consciousness, now that she had only to wait? There was a surging sound in her ears. She was becoming unconscious, and with a last despairing effort she tried to tear at the handkerchief, but her hands refused to obey her will. She was forgetting everything. What was it she was trying to do?

The Canon moved the handkerchief, and lifting her unconscious figure into his arms, staggered with it into the house and up the stairs. The horses were left, panting with their gallop, untended in the drive.

As he laid his burden down in the room that had been hers, and which had been untouched since the last time that she had slept there, Angela stirred as if with returning consciousness, and the Canon paused to take from his pocket the violet poison-labelled bottle that had stood him in such good stead, and to sprinkle some of it on the handkerchief, again to hold to her face. The half religious but wholly brutal passion that possessed him killed all fear and scruple in him, and he spilled the drug out carelessly, so that she might remain unresisting still while he crept downstairs again to bolt and bar the hall door through which he had entered.

A savage exultation was in his heart as he hastened back, and he was conscious of a feeling of added justification for his actions in the fact that the old maids had not interfered. He had been half afraid that he would encounter them in the hall, and have to argue—to lie, if need be—in order to satisfy their anxiety on behalf of their niece. The fear of them had hastened his violence, and now that their tacit admission of his right to do as he liked with his wife strengthened his own belief, he returned with a quiet conscience to the room above, and knelt down by the bed on which Angela lay unconscious, to ask the God of all kindness and purity to bless the act by which he was humbly striving to save the rebellious handmaiden entrusted to his care from impurity and spiritual destruction, and to preserve the respect of the congregation for the true faith and its ministers.

## CHAPTER XLII

SQUIRE GATEACRE'S groom was a reserved and slow-thinking man, who performed his orders very faithfully, but without question or curiosity. He had an almost religious hatred of gossip, and although he was looked upon in the village as a very interesting personage now that he had the duty of driving Mrs. Presyllett between the Hall and "The Barn," it is probable that he formed less conjectures about the reason of her residence with his master and mistress than any other man in Windlehurst. He obeyed the orders that the Squire gave him, and their reason was not his affair. He had heard that the Rector was away. Probably his wife preferred the Hall to the lonely Rectory until he returned. He did not take the trouble to exercise his slow wits over a matter that did not concern him.

On the night of the abduction, when Canon Presyllett met him in the Hartle lane, telling him that he would take his place and drive his wife home, the sovereign which accompanied the suggestion seemed to him unnecessary.

He had passed through a lifetime with the impression that there are two orders of beings in the world—the rich, whose duty it is to command, and the poor, whose duty it is to obey; and when the one who commanded was the Rector of the parish, he obeyed as a matter of course. The pulpit voice made hesitation out of the question.

His mind centred itself on the sovereign, and till he had reached the village ale-house to taste the first joys of its possession, not a scruple entered his head about what he had done. But the immensity of the sum which had been given him struck his dull mind when change was handed to him across the bar in copper and silver. If the Rector's

wish to drive his wife had simply risen, as he said, from a desire to give her a pleasant surprise, why had he paid him such an immense sum for his complaisance? Vague rumours which had reached him, but to which he had religiously denied his ear, began to return and render him uneasy. The men round him were trying to get information out of him too as he drank, and though his faithful and praiseworthy reserve about his employer's affairs would not let him open his lips to satisfy them, still the questioning made him uneasy. His master had given him a distinct order, and he had disobeyed it at the Rector's suggestion on his own responsibility. It would be an awkward thing if, after twelve years' faultless service, he found that he had done something that his master did not wish. The thought of returning to Mrs. Gateacre with the news began to disturb him, and before the one glass of ale was swallowed he had decided to walk back to "The Barn" and see that it was all right before he faced his mistress.

As he reached the church he caught sight of the brougham being driven very rapidly in the direction of the Rectory, and he stood hesitating, wondering whether to follow it or to go on to "The Barn" and satisfy himself by a word with Mrs. Marlow that he had done nothing of which the Squire would disapprove.

The chance that made him decide on the latter course, the chance that had made him a moment too late to stop the brougham and inquire, as he would have done, whether he should follow to the Rectory to take the brougham home, an inquiry which would have roused Angela in time to her danger—these are the things that have to be reckoned with and accounted for when we try to form a conception of God, the motive Spirit of all happenings.

Ten minutes later the man was startling Mrs. Marlow with his story, and was becoming as startled and frightened himself to find the effect that it had upon her.

She ran upstairs almost hysterical to ask her master what was to be done.

Gabriel had been undressing, his mind full as Angela's had been of day-dreams of their future, and he did not

answer her. Instead he put on his coat again, with the haste and spirit of a man who was well.

"You are not going out, surely, sir? you so ill," she sobbed, more terrified than ever by the set expression of his silent face.

"I had forgotten," he said. "Where is the brandy?"

He seized the flask from the table, and pushed it into his pocket. It might be necessary to keep back the weakness that it terrified him to think of.

In a moment, it seemed to her, he was downstairs and gone, with no word for the unhappy groom, who was anxious to apologise.

Mrs. Marlow made up by her reproaches for her master's silence.

It is a relief to some good people to be angry with somebody. That is the chief use some of us have for a personal Deity who can be blamed for evil happenings.

"You wicked idiot," shouted the good lady hysterically, "you have let that fiend get hold of my poor mistress, and now you have driven my poor dear master out to his death. Don't stand staring and mumbling there. We must follow him. Heaven only knows whether we shall not have to pick him up and carry him home. Him that was in his bed yesterday and just up for the first time. Oh dear! oh dear!"

She was seizing him by the arm and hurrying him out into the dark lane, where they hobbled along breathlessly side by side, stumbling in the darkness, and panting with their exertions.

Gabriel, in spite of his weakness, had far outstripped them. They could not even hear the sound of his running. He had not to stop for breath as they had to do a hundred times before they reached the Barnwood Road, where Mrs. Marlow almost stumbled into the Squire, who was returning from the station on foot.

They were just under the lamps of the Rectory gate, but the Squire did not recognise in the bonnetless and disordered old lady, purple-faced with her exertions, the trim house-keeper of "The Barn." His groom had already entered the dark garden, and he would have passed with a good-natured



apology if she had not clung to his arm, holding him desperately till she could get her breath back sufficiently to speak and tell him what had happened.

Her words when they came were wild and incoherent, but it was easy for the Squire to grasp the one horrible fact that poor Angela had been carried away by the Rector, and his round red face turned white and ghastly in the lamp-light.

"And your master has gone there?" he asked excitedly. "God grant that he was in time."

He strode up the path asking questions quickly, and swearing horribly at the poor old soul in his excitement because she could not answer quickly enough.

When they reached the still waiting brougham, the groom was lighting the lamps mechanically, and Dr. Cairn stood beside him.

"We are all too late," he said brokenly as they hurried up, "all too late."

## CHAPTER XLIII

ANGELA'S unconsciousness was very cruel. It left her too late to make any resistance possible, too soon to save her from any of the horror of her degradation. Perhaps it was part of the clergyman's plan that it should be so.

The completeness with which during the past days he had managed to identify his lust with the requirements of his creed prevented him feeling shame or regret even when his lust was satisfied and the Beast spoke no longer.

He lighted a candle on the dressing-table to exult over her brokenness, and his voice took its old tone of spiritual authority.

"Now, woman, you may go back to your atheist lover if you wish, and if you think that he will take you," he said severely; "but you can no longer hope to exculpate yourselves in the eyes of the world by pretending that the holy ordinance of God did not make us man and wife. You will be known for what you are, a woman who has abandoned her husband to live in sin. You will not be able to satisfy your wilful animosity by bringing contempt upon me and the position God has given me. I say that you are free to live a life of sin if you please, if you dare to face the eternal damnation which will infallibly be your reward. To save your soul from destruction, I am ready to forgive and forget what is past, and to offer you the haven of your husband's home and his love. It is an offer that few men would make, perhaps, but I have been taught by that holy religion you have revolted against to be merciful and to forgive."

He paused, as if expecting that his eloquence, his magnanimity would bring some response from her. In the depth

of his foul heart he had treasured up the hope that her passion would be something like his own, like that of the few women who had cared for him and suffered for caring. With them, poor creatures, because they had loved him, passion had asserted itself responsive to his own as soon as the barrier of reserve had been broken through by his villainy; and he had half expected this woman, who hated him, and had given all the pure love of her heart to another man, to be like them.

But she, a poor heart-broken girl, lay shuddering with her face hidden in the pillow, and her fingers tearing like a mad woman's half consciously at the white rounded breasts that his hands had caressed, as if with her blood she could wipe out the memory of his touch.

The man of God felt uncomfortable as he stood watching her and saw that her nails had lacerated the white skin, felt almost as if he had done some wrong, and he did not stop to pray with her, as he had intended to do, that God would forgive her revolt and incline her heart to turn from her sin. He could not pray with her when she lay like that, and he left the room silently to kneel alone in the room above, and struggle against the unpleasant doubt which was disturbing him.

Angela had not uttered a sound until the door closed behind him. Then a low piteous wail broke from her, more like the anguish-cry of a wounded animal than of a human soul.

"O Gabriel! Gabriel!" she cried with her lips, but they were dry and hard, and made no sound.

She tore again at her fouled body, loathing and abhorring herself because it was hers, hers till the end of life, with its stain never to be cleansed, never to be forgotten, and yet linked inseparably with the mind that loathed it. The sight of it horrified her, and she gathered her dress together at the neck where it had been torn rudely open, and straightened it out so that it covered her. But her body was there, all the same; what was the mere covering of a dress? It was with her always, she could not get away from it. She writhed from side to side, in the agony of the thought.

She was free to go away? Why did she stay here in this place, the very sight of which filled her with horrid nausea? She sprang up, only to sink back again. She could not get away from its loathsomeness. It had become part of her. She could not ever see Gabriel again. That was impossible, of course, for he would loathe her now as she loathed herself—her body, but not her mind. That was as pure as it had always been, but how could the two be separated? She must carry the degradation and horror with her always, and be always alone. She could face nobody now, nobody that was not as loathsome as herself, and her mind could not live with them. There was no place in the world for her. Why could she not die? Why had God not let her die already? It seemed incredible to her that she could have remained in the carriage so long, when she knew where it was taking her. Why had she not thrown herself out in the road, at the gate? It would have killed her perhaps, but that would have been a hundred times better than this. Gabriel could have kissed her then when she was dead, and have felt no pollution when his lips met her cold ones. Why had she not guessed what the handkerchief meant and torn it away? The remembrance of chances which she had let slip tortured her, and she turned and twisted in agony.

It was a sentence of Gabriel's which came to comfort her. "Grief for the past," he had said, "is the most useless thing in the world, except where it teaches a lesson for the future. When that is learnt, or if there is none to learn, it is a duty to forget. The only thing worth thinking is: what are we going to do?"

What was she going to do? Her mind had schooled itself so well to think as her lover wished, that she found her revolt at the lost chances of the past cease to affect her at once. What was she going to do? She had been feeling a hot revolt against the Creator who could allow her to be degraded and lost, but with the remembrance of Gabriel's words it died away. Nothing happens for us to criticise, only to direct us to the next move that is required of us, to make us think what is the best thing and to do it. But surely for her there was no best thing. God had left her

without any light or hope of anything. Nothing was worth doing.

Still there was relief in thinking, in centring her mind on the vague future instead of the terrible unrecallable past.

She began pacing the floor, trying to keep her mind cool, as Gabriel would have done. As she passed the mirror she shrank back, afraid of seeing the reflection of her face even, the face that had become loathsome to her. She felt a wild desire to tear at it with her fingers in her hatred, but that was madness, useless madness. Gabriel would tell her only to think what would benefit herself and others.

Death!

The thought came as an inspiration. God was merciful after all. He had left in her hands the power of death, had left her able to destroy the body that had been for ever polluted.

She glanced round the room, wondering how it could be done, with something of relief for the first time in her heart, at the thought of release from her loathsomeness.

The room had been left exactly as she quitted it on the morning of her flight. Her abandoned corset lay on a chair. Gabriel's books were piled on the dressing-table, and at the sight of them her hot eyes melted for the first time into tears, and she bent down passionately to kiss the printed sentences that his mind had originated. But the very touch of her lips was impure now, and with a strange tender fancy she raised her face and let her dishevelled hair fall on the page, the hair that Gabriel had loved. That at least had not been touched. Her scissors lay beside the books, and with a quick impulse she raised them and cut away the red-gold ruthlessly. Gabriel could kiss that when she was gone, surely, in remembrance of her. A quaint conceit flashed into her mind, a wish that her hair could live and feel his touch when her degraded body was hidden away.

But she tore her mind from its impractical wandering, and as her eyes fell on the beloved books again, they gave her a suggestion. By their side in the study cupboard she had caught sight of more than one bottle, the red label of which promised death.

She hurried to the drawer where she had left her keys, and finding them still there, selected with trembling fingers the one she had used to secure the hidden books.

Then on tiptoe she took the candle and stole to the door, and down the silent staircase. Thank God the study door was unlocked. Her face had no expression but eagerness as she crossed the cathedral-like room, the candle-light casting strange shadows everywhere, and falling on her white cheeks and the halo of gold that framed her beautiful face.

But with the means of death in her hand, the thought of what she had lost came to her and made her cry again.

"O Gabriel, we should have been so happy," she said aloud, with rippling sobs, as the pictures he had painted only an hour or two before came back to her. It seemed very hard of God that He could not have let them enjoy their happiness. But that was a thought which Gabriel would not have liked. There must be sorrows as well as joys, disappointment as well as realisation, or God's creatures would be left without feeling, without hope, without the endeavour that made up the pleasure of life. It was not for her, Gabriel said, to judge how much of the joy and how much of the sorrow should be hers. Her duty was only to do the next thing, the thing that pleased her best out of those which were possible.

But if she could only have seen Gabriel's face once more, just to have seen it without being near enough to think of the pollution which forbade him to touch her. Perhaps she would see him afterwards, although Gabriel thought it was impossible. Still, whether he was right or not, it could not affect her action. Even if there was unhappiness after death, it could be no greater than that of living, the thing that she was.

She started, thinking that she heard a footstep; and the fear that if the Canon found her, even the release of death might be denied her, made her take a draught of the narcotic quickly.

It had been a false alarm, but that did not matter. She might have liked to tell Gabriel that the hair was for him, and that the Canon had not touched it. But he would understand it.

Her mind was quite clear still. She felt no sign of the approach of death. Was it possible that the label was a lie? She was about to reach for the bottle again, when a feeling of dizziness came over her, and with it a great fear and regret.

Not fear of death, but fear lest she should die before she had tried to leave one word of comfort or consolation for Gabriel. She was unutterably selfish; she had thought only of herself, and not of him. She was leaving him without a word.

She took up the candle quickly and walked dizzily across to the writing-table. The Canon had left a sermon half written there; and, fighting against the stupor which was coming over her rapidly, Angela plunged his pen into the ink and began to write on the blank sheet that lay uppermost.

“Darling, darling love.”

A thought came to her, as her hand moved, that she was dying without a prayer, but she forced it back as too selfish for consideration when Gabriel was being left without one word of comfort, and her hand ran on unevenly over the paper that her eyes could scarcely see.

“Forgive me if I am wrong, but there seemed no other way, poor darling. He made me too loathsome for you to love, and I could not live without your love. Good-bye, darling. My last thought is of you; my heart is all yours. The hair . . .”

Her hand went on, but made no readable sign, and her head fell forward on the desk.

She was quite dead when Dr. Cairn, who had run all the way from the spot where Iphigenia told him her news, having smashed one of the lower windows to let himself into the locked house, found her with the pen in her cold stiff fingers.

## CHAPTER XLIV

"WE are all too late," said Dr. Cairn to the Squire and the housekeeper as they all huddled together with horror-struck faces in the light of the brougham lamps. "Her aunts actually saw the villain driving her here, and would not stretch a hand to help her. I shall never be able to speak to those women again. I have left poor Lyne inside. He is a miracle, that man; ran all the way from his place, and kept as calm as a corpse when I told him the whole terrible truth. He is with her now. I knew that he would want to be alone, poor fellow, and I am going for the constable. It is the right thing, I suppose."

"But you can't arrest a man for touching the woman he has married," blurted out the Squire. "That is the worst of it; you can't touch him. It is not even contempt of court, for the plea for nullity hadn't been actually entered."

"No, you can't touch him," said Cairn, "though his crime is murder."

"Murder!"

"Yes, the poor girl has poisoned herself. I had to meet Lyne and tell him. The man seemed almost glad to hear it when he knew the other thing. She is out of the pain of it," he said. "I can understand it making the poor young thing not know what she was doing. If I had my way, Presyllett should hang for it; but, as you say, the law can't touch him. I am just going to notify the suicide. Laudanum she took. That hypocritical fiend seems to have had a stock of it. I always thought he took drugs."

"Where is Presyllett?" asked the Squire, his fingers tingling; and the doctor shook his head. "I don't know. I didn't see him. But there is no doubt as to what has



happened. The poor girl left a letter for Lyne, in which she showed plainly enough. I gave it to him before he saw her."

"And he is with her now," said the Squire in an awed tone. "Poor fellow! Poor fellow!"

"I left him just going into the study where I found her. I think he waited till I was out of the house, wanting to be quite alone with her. Don't give way like this, Mrs. Marlow."

The sympathetic old lady had begun to scream in violent hysterics, and the Squire almost envied her this means of relieving her feelings. To stand still and do nothing, knowing that he had promised to guard and protect the poor girl, and that if he had performed his duties a little more faithfully, the poor thing might have been alive and happy! Whatever he took in hand he always did badly. What could have possessed him to make him think his mere monetary business in town was worth considering, when a woman's honour and life were at stake? He had brought back over a thousand pounds in notes with him, which he had been too late to place in the Barnwood bank that night, and a mad impulse came over him to tear them up. It would have been a relief to him, but the uselessness of it held him back. Better keep it to wound Presyllett in some way, if only by giving it to the Nonconformists in the village.

His anger against the man he had thought so holy, helped to divert his thoughts from the regrets that tortured him.

"I will make it the business of my life to see that villain hounded out of the village and the church," he said to the doctor, who was attending, with professional brusqueness, to the hysterical old lady; and Cairn shrugged his shoulders.

"That won't do the poor girl any good; but I'm damned if I don't horsewhip him myself if he has the effrontery to show himself again."

When Mrs. Marlow had grown calmer, and had been prevailed upon to sit in the brougham, the two men stood talking together again in whispers.

"I don't know exactly what to do about Lyne," said the doctor. "The reserve strength that he has drawn on to

keep him up like this will go before long, and leave him helpless; and still I don't feel somehow as if I can intrude myself on him while he is with her. I shall give him another quarter of an hour, I think. Poor fellow! it is hardest of all on him. He was desperately fond of her."

"They seemed made for one another," said the Squire, shaking his head. "How did she look, poor thing, when you found her?"

The doctor was going into all the details, when he remembered for the first time the errand on which he had been engaged when Iphigenia's story sent him in hot haste to the Rectory.

"If you don't mind waiting for Lyne," he said abruptly, "I will go and see Skeggs the cobbler. They say he has had a relapse and is dying. I should have had to come here if every patient I've got had been *in extremis*, but I can't do much good now. If Lyne collapses, all you have to do is to give him half a wine-glass of brandy, drive him home as quickly as you can, and put him to bed. I will call at the constable's as I pass, but I wouldn't disturb Lyne until he comes, if I were you."

The Squire nodded, and his voice broke as he answered—

"I shall take him home to the Hall. He has nobody to nurse him now, poor fellow."

The next moment the doctor was trotting off with his professional briskness down the gravel path; the Squire, nervously unwilling to be left alone, accompanying him to the gate.

When he walked back slowly, it was a relief to him to see the brougham again, with the groom on the box, where he had taken his seat to remove as far as possible his feeling of strangeness. The man was whistling under his breath, with the unconsciousness of habit, a music-hall air, and from the inside of the carriage came faint moans, which showed that Mrs. Marlow was not yet fully recovered from her hysterics. There was no other sound in the dark garden, or from the obscurity beyond where the house stood, indicated by two feeble rays of light, one yellow from the hall, where the doctor had lighted the lamp, the other tinged with colour as it forced its way through the stained window of the study.

There was an air of uncanniness about it all, with the knowledge that in the room lay a young beautiful woman driven to death by a cruel wrong, with the knowledge that her lover might, for all he knew, have fallen insensible with weakness by her side, that made the Squire glad of the companionship of the groom and the patient horses. How long would it be before he could intrude on his friend's grief and carry him away to Rachel's care and sympathy?

Meanwhile, in the silent house of death itself, Gabriel had not gone straight to the study, as Dr. Cairn had expected. He had waited till the sympathetic little man was out of the place, but not to see Angela. He could not do that yet.

As the hall-door closed he had taken up the lamp which Cairn had lighted, and began to look into the rooms of the house one by one.

A shudder ran through him when he entered the room where the chief tragedy must have taken place, as the disordered bed and the signs of Angela's belongings suggested. The other tragedy was nothing to this. He could almost be glad for her sake that Angela was dead, that the scene had been wiped out from her mind by a merciful oblivion, even though her death left him so utterly and irretrievably lonely. He could still have been happy and helped her to forget; but real forgetfulness would never have come to her, nothing could have ever cured the sting of her degradation. For her happiness it was almost better that she should have died, and he wanted no happiness for himself which was gained at the cost of hers.

The gleam of her severed hair lying on his books drew him across to the dressing-table, and the terrible hardness of his face softened as he took up the soft red-gold and pressed it to his lips.

But he could not think even of his love and misery yet, and he let the hair lie where he had found it, although a subtle sympathy told him its meaning.

His face was hard and stone-like again as he went on, looking into every room until he came to that in which the Rector knelt praying.

Canon Presyllett looked up, with panic on his gaunt face, as

the figure of Gabriel entered silently. He had justified himself to God, with the complete assurance that his victim's defender was too weak and ill to interfere with that settlement of the question; and with fear and surprise he remained on his knees, unable to move a muscle or close the loose-lipped mouth that had been open in invocation.

Gabriel had put down the lamp and locked the door without uttering a word. He was standing with his back against it now, tearing the bandages off his injured arm. The flesh showed all red and scarred beneath, and he moved his exposed fingers as if trying their strength.

There was a fiercer exultation in his heart than that which had stirred the pulses of the man of God, when *he* found himself alone with his prey. But even now the Infidel's dread of any unthought emotion made him curb himself, trying to look upon his action from the broad point of view from which he examined everything.

To the trembling Canon the silence became unbearable.

"May I ask why you have forced yourself into my house?" he asked, trying to give his voice the strength of angry indignation.

"I came to tell you that your crime is finished," said Gabriel quietly. "The woman you have wronged has poisoned herself. You are a murderer, Canon Presyllett."

The clergyman rose to his feet, the new fear and horror forcing back the old. For a moment he felt convicted of the crime of which he was accused.

But it was only for a moment. The next he had put away the idea of his own responsibility as ridiculous. The sin lay with the wicked woman herself, who had so far forgotten the laws of her God that she dared to enter His presence un-called, and with the man who by his wicked blasphemies had robbed her of the faith which would have held her back.

The completeness with which his conscience absolved him gave him courage, and he drew himself erect, with something of his old pulpit manner.

"My wife a suicide!" he said. "And so this is the end of your horrible work. You have shattered her faith, you have blinded her to the bindingness of the holy marriage

tie, and your teaching has ended in this, a suicide's terrible death."

But Gabriel held himself back no longer. The emotion in him could find no more useful expression than in the thing he meant to do. His decision was a just one, if any decision is just by which society puts an end to an existence which menaces the safety of all its members. His instinct was as worthy as any which makes us wipe the venomous reptile from our path without scruple.

Before the Canon had finished his exhortation Lyne had leaped upon him, dragging him to his knees, and burying his fingers in his throat.

A superhuman strength possessed him, and he was anxious to get through with his work before it left him.

There was some little satisfaction for him in choking the life out of the unholy thing that writhed under his hands, clawing at his wounded arm, as if he would relax his hold for mere physical torture. He would breathe more freely when he had destroyed the foul beast which had taken Angela from him, so that no note of exultation or triumph should be raised at her misery. But the mere physical gratification of it would not have enabled him to go on, when the man's face grew purple and his religious eyes bolted out horribly, if a sense of duty had not upheld him, a sense that he was giving to a just resentment the only expression which could in any way satisfy it. It would be a wicked and unnatural thing to ignore it, to live placidly and know that the Rector of Windlehurst was alive.

It was a filthy thing to kill, and spluttered and whined and grovelled horribly before the life was out of it; but the grip of Gabriel's fingers never relaxed until it was still, and could be kicked out of his way with his boot, as he went down to bid Angela a last good-bye.

He was kneeling over her, kissing her cold cheeks, with all the stony coldness melted out of his face, when Squire Gateacre, unable to bear the suspense of the dark garden any longer, at last entered the study; and Gabriel rose at once.

"I am glad that you are here, Gateacre," he said, almost

in his natural voice. "I have something to talk over with you. But let us walk outside. The house stifles me."

He was anxious to get away from the room where Angela lay, now that he was no longer alone with her.

The Squire noticed that he held himself erect, with no sign of weakness; that there was almost an elasticity in his step. He wondered that his face could be so calm and peaceful after his great trouble, and did not understand that to Gabriel Lyne the past was nothing except in so far as it pointed out a course for the future.

"Feelings are only given us," he had written in one of his books, "to be turned into actions."

He was the first to speak when they reached the porch.

"What ought to be done to a creature like Presyllett, Squire?" he asked, as if it were a mere theoretical question that had arisen in his mind.

"If I had my way," said Gateacre hotly, and glad of a vent for his emotion, "the fiend should be hanged. He is directly responsible for that poor darling's death. But we can't hang him; we can't do anything, except make public opinion too hot for him to hold his living."

"The man is a murderer," said Gabriel.

"Yes, but not according to the law."

"That is only because the law cannot be framed to include every case of crime. Where it fails by an accident like this, I think a man should leave the law out of question and punish the crime himself. What do you think?"

"Kill him?"

"It is the punishment which public opinion has always held to be the only right one for murder."

"You must not think of it, my boy," exclaimed the Squire, alarmed by the quiet determination of his friend's tone. "He deserves it, but that would not prevent your being hanged if you took the law into your own hands."

"That would only matter to a man who cared for his life or for the condemnation of thoughtless people. I hope that is your only objection, because I have killed him. I was glad to see you, because you are a magistrate, and I can deliver myself formally up to you, to answer for what I have done."

The Squire stopped dead in the path.

"Lyne, you don't mean it?"

"Of course I mean it. It was the only thing to be done."

"But you will be hanged, man. Cragg the constable will be here directly, and he will take you in charge."

"I suppose so."

The Squire stood panting breathlessly, his excitement contrasting strangely with Gabriel's calm.

"But, man alive, don't you care what happens to you?" he blurted out frantically. "You can't stop here and be treated like a common felon."

"It will not make me like a common felon," said Gabriel. "If the thing was right in itself, and I think it was the only course, it does not matter what people call it."

The Squire was plunging into the pocket of his great-coat, and brought out a roll of notes.

"Get away, man," he said hoarsely in his excitement, "get away out of the country. Here is a thousand to help you till you find your feet. Be quick. Get to Barnwood at once, before anybody else knows."

He seized his arm to hurry him along, but Gabriel shook his head, smiling.

"You are a good friend, Gateacre; but I don't want anybody to think I am ashamed of what I have done. There was plenty of my poor girl's poison left, if I had been afraid of the consequences. Thank you all the same, Squire; and good-bye. Here is the constable."

That night Gabriel was lying unconscious in the prison infirmary at Barnwood, whither he had been driven in a state of collapse in the Squire's brougham, while the news of his "crime" spread widecast over the country. Windlehurst was frantic with excitement over the twin tragedy, and shook its head sagely over the result of a non-Christian belief. The Infidel of Windlehurst had acted more respectably than they expected as a general rule, but his cloven hoof was sure to show sooner or later. They had always said it, and now their words had come true. There was nothing like the

good old faith to keep a man respectable. People who had begun after the fire, and the consequent enthusiasm for the Infidel, to admit openly that there might be certain things in the Christian creed about which a man may honestly hold two opinions, ceased to make public a theory so dangerous, and fought against its existence in their minds, for fear that it might ultimately lead them to the gallows. That an opinion which by any possibility can lead one to the gallows must be irreligious, was an unquestioned axiom, the precedent of Jesus notwithstanding.

The two old maids at Lilac Lodge spent a day rocking in each other's arms and weeping, partly because the poor Rector was dead, "martyred" Prudence called it, a little because they had lost the niece whom they had never understood, but chiefly because she had dragged them into the scandal which they had striven against all their lives, and which must drive them from their home.

"If *she* had only been more like other girls," sobbed Iphigenia a hundred times in the day—for they had tacitly agreed to avoid her name. "If she had only been content to be as good as we are, instead of running after every strange idea that she heard, how happy she would have been."

"She had everything to make her happy," agreed Prudence, "the love of a good man, and a position which anybody might have envied."

And then they wept again to think of the martyred Rector.

The reaction against Gabriel had caused public opinion throughout the place to veer round to the side of Canon Presyllett, and even the inquest, which was smoothed over as much as possible by a coroner who respected the institutions of his country, did not affect it sufficiently to prevent a subscription being raised and largely subscribed to, in order to raise a handsome tomb by the church-door to the holy man who had been killed for pluckily asserting his right to his own wife.

They were kind to poor Angela too, and after deciding unanimously that her death could only be due to a freak of madness, kindly gave her body the honour of being buried in the same grave as her husband's, even piously expressing



their hopes that in spite of her faults the two might meet again in heaven.

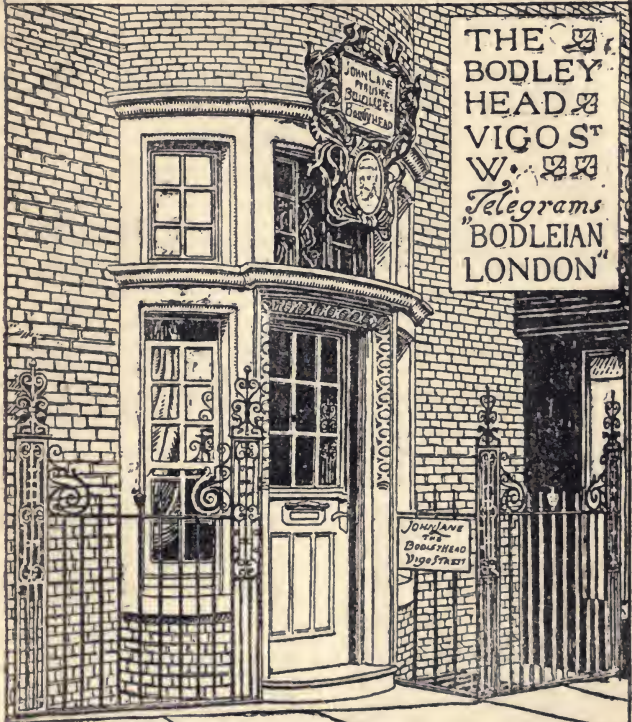
The Squire did not subscribe, but he performed one last kindly office for the girl whom he could never think of without tears.

When the little Tomtits paid a last visit to the tomb before leaving Windlehurst, they were shocked to see that the inscription had been mutilated. The Rector's name and virtues were left untouched, but after the line "Also of Angela" followed a rough chisel-mark. Some evilly disposed person had obliterated the words "his wife."

THE END



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